THE PUBLIC INTELLECTUAL IN INDIA

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ROMILA THAPAR *with*

SUNDAR SARUKKAI DHRUV RAINA PETER RONALD DESOUZA
NEELADRI BHATTACHARYA JAWED NAQVI

The public intellectual in India is an endangered species. Should we care? In this well-argued book, Romila Thapar and others tell us why we should. Thapar begins by defining the critical role that such individuals play in our societies today. Collectively, they are the objective, fearless, constructive voice that asks the awkward questions when government, industry, religious leaders and other bulwarks of society stray from their roles of ensuring the proper functioning of a country whose hallmarks are (or should be) social and economic equality, justice for all, and the liberty to say, think and profess the fundamental requirements of good citizenship. Through the lens of history, philosophy, science, and politics, she shows us the key role enlightened thinkers and activists have played in India, Europe and elsewhere. Today, as the liberal space in India is threatened by religious fundamentalism, big business, and, worryingly, a government that appears to be tacitly (and sometimes overtly) encouraging the attack on freedom of expression, secular values and rational readings of history, there could be no book as timely as this one. With contributions from writers and scholars in the fields of philosophy, science, history, journalism and social activism, *The Public Intellectual in India* shows us [illegible] have independent voices [illegible] underprivileged, ensure human [illegible] social justice, and watch over the smooth functioning of our liberal, secular democracy.

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Edited by Chandra Chari and Uma Iyengar

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Bol, ye thora waqt bahut hai
Jism o zaban ki maut se pahle
Bol, ke sach zinda hai ab tak
Bol, jo kucch kahna hai kah le

(Speak, this brief time is ample
Before the dying of body and tongue
Speak, for truth still lives,
Speak, to say what needs to be said)

'Bol', Faiz Ahmed Faiz

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A NOTE ABOUT THE BOOK

I was invited by the Book Review Literary Trust to give the third Nikhil Chakravartty Memorial Lecture. This I did on 26 October 2014. That lecture, which was entitled 'To Question or Not to Question, That is the Question', has now been revised and expanded. Five people were asked to respond to specific aspects of the role of public intellectuals in this country. The essays by Sundar Sarukkai, Dhruv Raina, Peter deSouza, Neeladri Bhattacharya and Jawed Naqvi follow mine. I am delighted that they found the time to respond so thoughtfully. The book concludes with my comments on the above and after the public discussion on 2 March 2015.

I would like to thank all those who have made this book possible. The Book Review Literary Trust—Chandra Chari and Uma Iyengar—organized the lecture and the discussion, and edited the book. Niharika Gupta did a heroic job of transcribing the discussion in record time. David Davidar in further editing the text has given it a more accessible form. Deepak Nayyar chaired the discussion where the five papers were presented and ensured that discussants kept close to what they had intended to discuss. I would also like to thank Amit Bhadhuri, Neeladri Bhattacharya and Deepak Nayyar for their reactions to the first draft of the lecture that helped me sort out my thoughts for the initial lecture and for the much longer piece that appears in the book.

Romila Thapar

INTRODUCTION: THE PUBLIC INTELLECTUAL IN INDIA

ROMILA THAPAR

The distinguished journalist and thinker Nikhil Chakravartty and his generation in India thought and wrote about contemporary problems in a way that is rapidly changing in our times. In many ways Nikhil and others like him flawlessly performed the role that public intellectuals are expected to perform in our country. Nikhil's editing of *Mainstream* was associated with asking questions of those taking decisions that impinged on civil society. His contacts ranged from extreme political groups to politicians in government to opinion makers, all of whom he met with equal facility and regularity. This was his way of gauging and perhaps influencing opinion. But he guarded his autonomy fiercely. He justified declining a Padma award by explaining that it would curtail his independence as a journalist.

Nikhil and others like him were concerned about what was happening around them; they were accessible, welcoming and helpful. The discussion and debate of ideas relating to contemporary India was an essential part of the conversation. Being well read themselves they respected intellectual and academic opinion about public matters and always provided space to those whose concern was with the quality of the interdependence of many aspects of life. Such interdependence could hinge on the relationship between society and politics and where this happened there was a focus on this relationship.

The latter required, and had, space for discussion. Today that space has shrunk and the intellectual parameters have narrowed. Those in authority and those influencing public opinion have less respect for the public intellectual now. The majority of current politicians are characterized by little, if any, vision of the kind of society they wish to construct, barring those that come with the limited concepts of extreme religious nationalism and the ambition of creating an enclosed, inward-looking society. For many, the aspiration is to make money and to push people around in order to do so. Possibly in this ambience potential public intellectuals also shy away from debating the quality of the interconnection.

As I look back on the past six decades, it seems to me that there has been a directional change from the 1990s. Prior to that it was understood that despite the frustrations and glitches in governance there could be meaningful discussion on how to organize and reorganize institutions to find new ways of nurturing the values we held as necessary to social advance. Institutions of various kinds had been created, intended to mark a breakthrough in information and knowledge, moving towards cutting-edge research. Some of this had happened, some of it not. From the 1990s there seems to have been a slouching into pedestrianism, with rare exceptions. The later economic crisis of the neo-liberal economy left us somewhat shaken. Today, even the mantra of 'development' sounds hollow since, so far, it seems to be a mirage. Leave alone the unfulfilled promises of investment from here, there and everywhere, even basic necessities are unavailable for millions of Indians and the numbers of the underprivileged have not declined substantially in twenty-five years. That the middle class has expanded a little and that we can boast of having a handful of the richest people

in the world may be a solace to some who are drawing up the balance sheet. But the reality on the ground prevents this from being regarded as development.

There is much activity in enforcing antiquated colonial laws that are for obvious reasons anti-democratic in character, which in turn leads to the silencing of those who question a range of decisions. It is difficult to reconcile oneself to what we had set out to do in the early years of independence and how inadequately we are trying to meet those aspirations. And it is not as if a particular programme of action is producing better results than the others: there is little programme of action in terms of adequate development. Half the population remains hungry, nor can it assuage its thirst with clean water, and social injustice cannot be wished away. The mafia, no longer outside the system, is now entrenched within it. Communities are troubled by a fear that often rides on the back of a religious or a caste identity. The citizen can still exercise the democratic right to vote and one hopes that this will survive. Disenfranchisement on one occasion was held out as a threat against minority communities, admittedly by a fringe group but was enough to distill fear. It is crucial to constantly re-assert the rights of citizens in the life of a nation. In this the public intellectual has to be visible.

Initially our concerns were with establishing democratic functioning and respect for citizenship, ensuring human rights and social justice, and protecting the underprivileged and those on and below the line of poverty. Today the focus is shifting to questions of religious identity and assertions of those that form the majority community, deepening the demarcation between communities and weakening social justice and the institutions that sustain society.

In recent years, actions that have been called illiberal have taken place and protest against these has been small. In the last few months there has been, week after week, some activity or some statement tacitly or openly supported by those claiming authority, that is unacceptable to liberal opinion, yet the protest is not always manifested in public. There is an unspoken wish that illiberal demands will in time die a natural death with the advance of democracy. Yet can we be sure that this will happen? And what will be our experience in the intervening period? My argument is not that there are no public intellectuals nurturing discussion in India today, but rather that the critical mass that is required for public debate to become essential to our civic life is not as large as it needs to be. So why aren't those that can be more outspoken speaking up? The fear is that in the absence of such a critical mass those that would like to question or comment succumb to self-censorship.

By way of an approximate background I would like to suggest what may be some of the reasons for the illiberal views and actions that we experience in today's India. During the years after independence we had a relatively liberal society, although there were occasions and actions that we reacted to as being altogether unacceptable. But in current times there has been an increase in what can only be called near-terrorist and threatening behaviour of varying ideological hues. Over recent years we have seen the manifestations of our own indigenous varieties of extremists coming from various ideological stables and faiths. More frequently among such groups there is a claim that some marginal action, some spoken words or the occasional written text, is a slight to a particular religious sentiment. This they punish by taking the law into their own hands. One kind of terrorism is that of the Maoists organizing revolution to

overthrow the state and the latter's retaliation in suppressing it. The other is a variety of religio-political organizations that want to pressurize the state and society by using religion to justify their political activities. The two are not on a par in their intentions and activities although both affect mainstream society. Where violence is activated by the slogan that religion is in danger, there religion is also motivating political perceptions. Both demand different kinds of states. And inevitably in the ensuing violence those least concerned with political ambitions and occupying the lowest rungs of society are the ones who suffer the most. There is no justice in this.

Religion and politics are now seemingly deeply entwined, although more often than not, the root cause for disruptive behaviour is not hurt religious sentiment, as is claimed, but a bid to assert power and control over some crucial aspect of civil society. This was perhaps not so focused earlier on, so we failed to caution against it, imagining that we were gradually moving towards secularizing our society; or that it was less rampant because governance by parties other than those tied to a religious motivation discouraged it, even though not very effectively. The present political scene seems to be regarded as a now-or-never situation by those that would want the Hindu right to take control of Indian society.

The happenings that we see now were less frequent at the time of independence. One recalls the outcry at the assassination of Mahatma Gandhi, an event that is now being publicly celebrated by those whose mentors approve of the assassination. We have to ask whether the increasing violence and intolerance we now witness is merely the surfacing of what has always existed since time immemorial, despite the fond belief that India has been a society of non-violence and

tolerance? Or has this latter activity been nurtured only in the last two centuries? Or even more recently?

Politicians and others speak of the slavery of the last one thousand years, happily mouthing the teachings of colonial scholars without giving it a second thought. But when examined historically, the deep disjuncture in Indian society did not take place with the coming of Islam in the eighth century, as is implied in the statement about slavery, but with colonial rule. This disjuncture lies in the fact that colonial rule reformulated the self-perception of Indians and of Indian activity. To put it starkly, without qualifying frills, the changes brought by colonialism affected many areas of life. The Indian economy was made subservient to British economic interests and not to Indian interests as in previous times. Economic historians have stated that the dominant economies in Asia a couple of centuries prior to colonialism were that of India under the Mughals and China. This was not so with the coming of colonialism. The colonial understanding of the functioning of caste was new to Indian society, having functioned differently in earlier times when the social structure had evolved in different ways under diverse historical conditions. The scrambling together of religious sects into a monolithic Hinduism and a monolithic Islam, and the confrontation of these two monolithic religious communities, and their projection back in history as maintained in colonial times, was a departure from existing religious self-perceptions. The colonial focus on religion as the pillar of Indian identity to the near exclusion of other identities, and the later endorsing of this notion by extremist religious politics, has led to our unquestioning acceptance of the colonial construction of who and what we are.

This is not to suggest that there were no lesser dislocations

in our history prior to this. Moments of crucial historical change require adjustments until they settle down, when through negotiation and accommodation new systems of functioning are worked out. Thus, when clan societies in the first millennium BC were confronted by the emergence of kingship, there was an element of disjuncture in these societies. One of the strands in our epics records the demise of the clan system, or as Krishna says in the Mahabharata, after the Kurukshetra war 'Sarvam kshatram kshayam gatam' (The extermination of the Kshatriyas); and the triumph of kingship in the Ramayana symbolized by the defeat of Ravana. When the nature of the state and kingship began to change in the mid-first millennium AD there were major changes in many areas with the establishment of what some historians have described as the feudal polity.

The coming of the Sultanates in the second millennium AD did result in recognizable adaptations and restructuring related to caste, religion and the economy, but largely only at the level of the elite. Local rural castes and cultures retained many features from the previous period, a more recognizable cultural change being registered in the urban areas. The Turks, Afghans, Arabs and Mughals came not just as invaders but also as traders and migrants from adjacent areas of Afghanistan, Persia, Central Asia and the Arab lands. They settled in India, quite a few married into local communities and gave rise to new castes and communities–such as the Bohras, Khojas, Navayats, Mappilas, Meos and many others. The British census listed them unequivocally as Muslim but initially their customs and beliefs were mixed. Many such sects saw themselves as distinct from the formal religions—Hinduism and Islam—and freely adopted local custom. Local administration often remained in

the hands of established families and the upper bureaucracy in both civil and military administration relied on Hindu ministers and officers. The infusion of new technologies into existing economic systems strengthened some of the local economies. The exchange of knowledge, between scholars from South, Central and West Asia, prior to the establishing of the colonial power, resulted in new knowledge, especially in the study of astronomy and mathematics. All this is substantially different from the impact of colonial rule on its colonies. Earlier, changes had evolved gradually but now attempts were made to remould and refashion the entire structure of society and interpret it anew with reference to an entirely different society and culture.

Part of our problem today arises from the fact that we have not understood the intensity of the colonial disjuncture. We have merely let it continue. The majority of our civil laws were made in a colonial context, yet we have not re-examined them after independence to ascertain the continuance of some and the discarding of others. I am not suggesting that we go back to what we assume Indian society was like prior to colonial rule, but that we try and understand the reality of precolonial India as being different from the way colonial perspectives represented it. This might encourage us to visualize the postcolonial society that we aspire to as different from the colonial and not just a continuation of it. We have to envision a future in which the colonial interpretation of Indian society is not the blueprint, but that from which we may borrow experience that we consider as apposite. For example, if colonial governance was intended to subordinate the population, governance today has to re-orient itself completely and to function as the protector of the citizen. It is still a long way away from that change.

India is not alone in this. Many ex-colonies in the world are

facing the need to assess their colonial experience in the process of their becoming new nations. These include aspirations to democracy with its essential concomitant of a secular society, to social justice that includes the riddance of poverty, and the crucial insistence on liberal values and liberal space as was earlier required by the ideology of anti-colonial nationalism.

Nations have to be built on an inclusive identity. When the colonial power is removed and the nation comes into being, then in a society of multiple identities—ethnic, religious, language, caste—there is a competition among these identities for dominance. Anti-colonial nationalism in India was reasonably secular but coming close on its heels were the two religious nationalisms, Muslim and Hindu. Colonial views on Indian history and society encouraged the emergence of religious nationalism. Muslim religious nationalism succeeded in creating Pakistan. Its counterpart, Hindu religious nationalism, is now making a bid for creating its equivalent in a Hindu Rashtra. Some of the current violence and demands for banning this and that to assuage the hurt to religious sentiments, are in effect tied to this ambition and have little to do with Hinduism as a religion.

In existing nations where nationalism drawing on religious, linguistic or ethnic identities has been successful in creating a state, it is used to justify identity politics. The identities that did not make it take on the characteristics of a kind of sub-nationalism until such time as they too inspire the making of a nation or else fall by the wayside. Identity need not always be derived from religion. With Bangladesh it was language. More recent but unsuccessful demands for nationhood, such as that of Khalistan among the Sikhs, stemmed again from religion within the context of a larger nation that is multi-religious.

Secessionist movements are not unknown even to well-established nations—such as Scottish nationalism—but they need not be violent or identified with an extremist ideology, although Irish nationalism, for obvious reasons, was different.

The colonial inheritance, where it remains unquestioned, persists, and religious nationalisms appropriate it and build on it. It dominates the thinking of those that regard themselves as defending all things Indian, by which they often mean Hindu, or else defending the religion they support. This is an implicit, if not explicit, continuation of James Mill's two-nation theory with its insistence on the innate hostility between Hindus and Muslims. So the counterpart to Pakistan has to be a Hindu India according to some, even if a secular India is ultimately more viable, given the history of multiple cultures and the plurality of religious beliefs. The argument that a religion-based state drawing on majority and minority religious communities as its units, militates against democracy is of little concern to such opinion.

In order to instil the legitimacy of this view, the control over education as advocated by Thomas Babington Macaulay acquires prominence. Education when confined to propagating a particular ideology does so through texts and syllabi that support the ideology. Macaulay's insistence on the need to control what is taught in educational institutions is what encouraged the making of the colonial mindset. The advice was not ignored by the more ambitious religious organizations. The content of what is being taught in the shishu mandirs, madrassas and other religious schools should therefore be evaluated by those professionally qualified in the same way as that which is being taught in secular schools.

Let me return to the nature of religious nationalism.

Muslim religious nationalism demanded a separate state using the colonial argument of Muslims and Hindus being separate nations forced to live in the same territory and, according to some, such a state could be the core of a rejuvenated Islamic world. Not all Muslim organizations in pre-Partition India supported this argument, and some opposed it; nevertheless it claimed to have had the support of the majority.

History, as viewed by Hindu religious nationalism is a simple narrative of Hindus having once had a great and glorious past which was destroyed by Muslim conquerors. Consequently, the creation of a Hindu state is projected as a legitimate objective. The unbroken descent of Hindu ancestry and religion from earliest times, according to this school of thought, legitimizes the primacy of the Hindus in the present, and takes up from Max Mueller's construction of a superior Aryan culture and the Aryan foundations of Indian (read Hindu) civilization. Interestingly, it was the Theosophists, and in particular Colonel Olcott, who first propagated this theory in the late nineteenth century. Olcott argued that the Aryans were indigenous to India and took civilization from India to the West. This theory is now being promoted by Hindutva, but with no reference to the colonial view where its origins lie.

Some of the theories therefore that we use today to explain and justify our definitions of identity, caste society, religion and such like, theories that draw on the ideas mentioned above, were initially fashioned by colonial writers to suit colonial policy and were the colonial brainchild of the nineteenth century. It is useful to examine them in terms of where and how they originated and discard those that are no longer viable two centuries later. Such a free-ranging debate that is not new to academic circles could as well be extended to a

wider public. Religious nationalism for all its espousal of the indigenous, clings with greater determination to its colonial roots. This is not surprising since the colonial context in the interpretation of Indian culture is foundational to the religious nationalisms of India.

As I've said earlier, the basic reading of Indian history as constructed by Hindu and Islamic religious nationalism—the two-nation theory of Hindus and Muslims being separate nations—is a colonial theory. The same applies to the focus on the Aryans as the root of Indian civilization to the exclusion of other factors. Both are creations of particular nineteenth-century European readings of the Indian past. Most historians have questioned these theories. Ironically, those of us who have questioned the formulations of the trilogy of Mill-Macaulay-Mueller as the authors of a colonial construction of the Indian past that should be subjected to critical enquiry are the ones who are accused of being anti-Hindu culture and religion, therefore anti-national, and who are, one and all, dismissed as 'Marxists'.

If this is to be excused then it could be said that in not perceiving the colonial disjuncture and recognizing its implications, the result has been a reading of Indian society and culture that prevents a shaking off of the colonial framework of thinking. But by now there is also an ambition to mould Indian society in a particular way. That ambition is facilitated by access to political power and the control it provides. When pared down to essentials the confrontation is not invariably over religious belief and practice, however insistently this claim may be made, but over other fears of the loss of social control that cannot be openly declared. The upholding of patriarchy for instance, or a resistance to the erosion of caste rules, is

slowly becoming more visible. It is expressed in violence against women and Dalits, a violence that is not new but seems to be more vehement now. The conflict may be described as a threat to religion, or to the even more ambiguous notion of 'tradition'. It can involve defending patriarchy or not contesting the suppression of the lower castes by arguing that the conflict is over religious belief or practice. The intention ultimately is to retain or to acquire authority. The historical moment is that of a postcolonial state—an independent nation—and the conflict is over the immense change in power relations that this entails.

The attempt to stifle speech and writing is not limited to religious identities alone. Caste identities are as stridently announced in the competition for social advantages. Those for whom such advantages can be historically justified are left behind in the race or are set upon, or even killed because of the competition. This could be ameliorated somewhat by changing the qualifications of the competition from caste to poverty. Given the present parameters of society there is often a curtailing of protest by claiming that the actions are consistent with traditional caste and religious norms, as has happened with the khap panchayats (caste councils in northern India). It is not always possible to distinguish whether the crime pertains to caste or religion, assuming that such a distinction is required.

The demand for burning and pulping books continues apace, together with the virulent abuse of the authors wherever possible and more so in the social media. The abuse is louder when it comes from those who proudly claim not to have read the books they are condemning. And this is generally the case. Publishers have begun to seek legal opinion before publishing a book. The laws of blasphemy are probably not far behind. Films

and documentaries are banned or threatened with banning, or they are censored for little reason. To try and prevent the use of abuse by censoring it in films is a tilting at windmills, since such abuse is part of the language of every street corner. It is even worse on social media when individuals are targeted. The visual media—especially in commercial advertisements, and Bollywood and its regional equivalents, make efforts to imitate 'the West' in their representation of an enviable lifestyle. Yet what is not discussed is whether these obvious outward manifestations of what some call westernization and others call modernity, are merely an imitation or whether they reflect a change in mindset that modernity would imply. And is the change in conformity with these symbols of a Western lifestyle? Change is not what is suggested in the statements of those politicians who maintain that women are raped because they move around in tight-fitting clothes and jeans imitating the Western woman.

Such statements reflect a far more serious crisis of identity in a world that is facing multiple points of change. We are still caught in a trap constructed by colonial interpretations of what we like to believe are representations of our tradition. But since we are no longer a colony but are an independent nation, it is difficult to reconcile this with how we understand fundamental questions of our identity. By way of example I will look at a few of these, although in effect there are many more. The ones I have picked are those where the intervention of the public intellectual is crucial but, as of now, tends to be less effective than one would wish. I am referring to our acquiescing in the politicizing of religion, our inability to publicly debate liberal views, and our hesitation in accepting a reasoned understanding of ourselves, rather than mythologizing who we are.

The fundamental questions of our time are not directly based on these concerns. The alleviation of poverty, the distribution of national wealth, the assurance of social justice in civil society are in many ways more fundamental. But touching on all these and converting their centrality into other kinds of issues such as the right to particular renditions of what are claimed as age-old religious belief and practice is a way of subverting the crucial changes that we have to face. All religions in this country accept caste stratification to a greater or lesser degree. This is so evident in the exclusions of Dalits across the board. All religions in this country support patriarchy. So, inevitably, when facing the argument that a certain practice negates 'Indian tradition' or is blasphemy in the eyes of a particular religion, we have to ask whether the practice denies the rights that we stand for today as a secular democracy, such as the equality of all citizens irrespective of gender, religion and caste. Since we are in the process of a major historical change, these questions have to take precedence. And since there is no common civil law, those that control the traditional codes will cling to that control.

The drama of the religious conversions of large assemblies of people is now threatening to become a frequent possibility, even if the religion to which people are supposedly being converted or re-converted, rejects the very concept of conversion. Intellectual differences are now being settled via assassination, as happened with Narendra Dabholkar and Govind Pansare, or with death threats. Terror can also be associated with the agencies of the state, claiming to protect citizens. Worse can come from fellow citizens motivated by extremist ideologies. This lies at the root of the politics of communal riots.

We seem bent also on imitating the culture of medieval

Europe with the Vatican Index banning books, Giordano Bruno being burnt at the stake, or Galileo Galilei being forced to recant his theory, and with the Inquisition legitimizing such activities in the name of supporting the Church and its teaching, but effectively to retain its power over the state. Closer to us in time are similar activities not of religious orthodoxy but of political ideologies supporting dictatorships. Do we have to emulate these models?

The version of Hinduism that is being propagated these days can be more easily used for political mobilization. Commonly referred to as Hindutva, it is by definition not identical to Hinduism. As has been pointed out by many, whereas Hinduism is a religion, Hindutva is an ideology for political mobilization. I have elsewhere referred to Hindutva as Syndicated Hinduism. It draws on the Judeo-Christian religions in terms of hierarchical organizations and attempts to have a creed of belief, which is why some prefer to describe it as the Semitization of Hinduism. The difference can up to a point be demonstrated in the relationship of Hindutva to Hinduism. Hinduism is a mosaic of belief systems, some linked, others not. Hindutva has the characteristics of a sect that reformulates selected beliefs to create in this case a socio-political organization with an attempt at ideological coherence. This is why it disallows ideas that either question its ideology or allow it to be modified or adapted. Its political function is primary. The term Hindutva was invented in this sense by V. D. Savarkar in 1923 and was adopted by the BJP as its ideology in 1989. Therefore, not all Hindus are or need be supporters of Hindutva despite the assumption of the latter that they are. As a belief system Hinduism accommodates a range of beliefs and sometimes even non-belief. The sect, in contrast, has always had a particular definition that its followers

observe, as with Hindutva. So far, those identified with Hindutva have tended to be viewed as a minority group within the majority community of the religion, Hinduism. This could of course change. Does Hindutva lack the confidence and security of actually being the majority community despite its claims to the contrary?

The resort to threats, violence and vandalism of some Hindutva groups remains inexplicable since the majority community to which they belong has overwhelming numbers. There are some obvious reasons for using intimidation on the general public that may provide some explication: to ensure that the majority gives its unalloyed political support to one party by raising the call that the religion is threatened; by disallowing a level playing field in the belief that doing so would no longer give an advantage to the majority; to prevent the erosion of the social code of caste and patriarchy; the apprehension that the nation may take upon itself the task of establishing a secular democracy—as was the intention initially—and thus deny automatic authority to the religious majority.

Religions in India, however, are not of the same mould as the Judeo-Christian ones. To recognize the difference would require that the pattern of religious organizations, how they affected society and also reflected it, and the history of the interaction of religions in India would have to be studied, as a complement to the study of textual traditions and theology. One obvious example of this is the manner in which caste and religious sects interacted, each affecting the other and creating links of a kind not known to other parts of the world.

On the face of it the relations between religion and society in the cultures of India and China were different from Europe, as indeed they were different from each other. So the specificity

of the culture, the way its religion related to its society, as well as its historical context, all these factors imprinted the form it took. We have to see how and why they differed, what was specifically Indian about its religion, and the nature of its interface with society. We have tended to study the texts and theologies of the religions, without giving sufficient attention to analysing the social institutions and observances that the religions gave rise to or on which they had an impact. This would need an analysis of the history of religions in India as part of the pattern of life of the society, and not just as a history of their respective texts. Religious organizations that run religious institutions such as temples, mosques, churches and gurudwaras as well as schools and other educational institutions have to be assessed in terms of their social functions apart from the religious.

Even if one accepts the divine origin of religious belief, the activity associated with a religion lies in the hands of its human devotees and has to be seen as its history, as all else is seen. How did this interaction vary from sect to sect or across sects of the various religions? What came to be called Hinduism in later times was in essence the juxtaposition of a large number of sects with their own focus of worship and ritual, some tied into caste and inevitably reflecting some of the differences associated with caste and some negating it. This in part explains why a geographical term came to be used later for a collection of religious sects. The term 'Hindu', used in West Asia, was derived from Sindhu/Hindush, referring to the river Indus. It initially designated a geographical area, and was then applied to people who lived there, and finally to the religions practised by them for which there was no single name.

As in all religions the history of Hinduism registers changes.

For many centuries the historicity of Rama as the avatara of Vishnu was not of any great concern to those that worshipped him, but now he is spoken of as a historical figure. For many centuries the sects chose the deity they wished to worship and the text that they regarded as sacred. There was no single sacred text since Hindu sects were not religions of the book. But today the Bhagavad Gita is being described as the 'national' book, to be taught in every school, which apart from anything else conflates nationalism with religion, despite their being distinct. And if we are going to collapse the two, then logically there will be a demand that in a multi-religious state we must also declare the Quran, the Bible, the Guru Granth Sahib, the Avesta, and the books sacred to other religious communities as national books. Would the secular in Indian democracy then be tied to a library of religious books? Surely they can be taught in school not as 'national' books but as texts of particular religions.

Religious sects as compared to a monolithic religion tend to shade off from the very orthodox to those far less so. This allows of greater flexibility and fluidity in belief and practice among them, than is normal in a religion treated as a monolithic entity. The change from sect to monolithic religion possibly changes the nature of the relationship between religion and society. The varied sects of Vaishnavas, Shaivas, Shaktas, and the Bhakti and Sufi sects, and many others, did not conform to a single church nor were they governed by an ecclesiastical authority. Conversion for most of these was an alien idea. Opting out of the sect one identified with could also affect one's caste identity, and a person without a caste identity was regarded as an outcaste, and of little consequence in the larger society. A caste identity would continue if a caste as a collective converted, as often happened in conversions to Islam or Christianity.

Many castes retained their caste identity even on conversion, and either used the caste name or referred to it when required. But conversion would then not annul social inequality as the caste identity continued to count in social ranking. And all religions in India, irrespective of their theoretical support of social equality, maintained caste distinctions—especially in the codes of marriage and inheritance—and particularly in the segregation of Dalit groups. Because much of religion was also linked to caste, it was not surprising that Christianity and Islam in India also functioned through a variety of sects, and recognized caste inequality and hierarchy in practice, however much they may have disavowed it in theory. This link often encouraged an overlap or closeness between various sects as in the dialogues between Sufi and Bhakti sects.

It also explains why, when there was disagreement and conflict over religious belief and practice, the hostilities were largely limited to sectarian confrontations. Since there were no monolithic religious communities of Hindus and Muslims organized across regions with a subcontinental base, there was little consciousness of at an all-India level religious concerns as there is now. The Chola rulers it seems were unaware of Mahmud of Ghazni as a threat to Hinduism because of his raids on wealthy Hindu temples. The devotional cults, sometimes referred to as Bhakti, in their early phase had similar but not identical manifestations in different parts of the subcontinent in the thousand years from the seventh to the seventeenth centuries AD. The later manifestations in each area show little recognition of earlier forms in neighbouring areas, although the message being propagated and the hymns sung by these 'sants' were not so dissimilar. Was this only because of the difference in regional language? This earlier kind of religious articulation

allowed religion to be relatively more tolerant, as religions go, although the orthodox did not refrain from hostility against what were regarded as heretical sects. Central to the social structure was the inexcusable social intolerance as expressed in the exclusion and oppression of all non-caste groups—and most of all the Dalits. The exclusion, often ignored by quoting the texts that do not pointedly refer to it, is evident however in descriptions of social practice.

The inter-weaving of religions and social forms, both of the past and the present, needs investigation. I have often said that the history of religion in Indian culture is distinctively different from what it has been in other cultures, and certainly from that of the West. Instead of investigating the difference, evaluating its nuances, and assessing how it related to the needs of those who supported it, as is required in the study of every religion, there is an insistence that it be seen as, and be converted into, a particular mould—similar to the Semitic religions as many have commented—emphasizing the power of religious organizations with hostility against those that contested its power. This does little justice to what was in many ways an interestingly different religious articulation in history, and to understanding its relation to a social structure that was specific to India. Texts too should be read with reference to their context. How did religious sects interact with social groups and how and why did they change when they did? Such an exploration would reveal the reality of the practice of a religion and not leave us imagining a reality. Hurt religious sentiments—irrespective of the religion they refer to—are equally an articulation of a rejection of contemporary socio-political changes as of an objection to the thwarting of the past practices of the particular religion.

It is not my intention to touch upon all the areas that

concern the public intellectual, nor to suggest that the ones I have chosen should have priority. My choice is conditioned by what I have observed to be present, hence my foray into what may be viewed by some as an excessive importance given to religion in the politics of our democracy. Be that as it may, as I have argued here and elsewhere, the form taken by the politics of religion as different from religion as such, took a particular turn in colonial reconstructions that we continue to nurture despite their disastrous role in present times. We are still hesitant to recognize in a realistic way that social institutions with religious identities during pre-modern times whatever was their influence on society, their nature and form differs. Perhaps we need to recognize what were the hostilities and the accommodations in the past. We may then understand the present better.

We have yet to learn that the demands of democratic functioning can be met perfectly well without the intervention of religion. Even to maintain a viable democracy there would have to be much more discussion of its essentials. To insist on adult franchise was an excellent decision but we need to go further in establishing institutions that support democracy and in questioning the continuation of colonial ideas that conflict with democracy. A distribution of wealth that negates the continuance of poverty, and the protection of social justice are two essentials of democratic functioning. These are the kinds of rights endorsed by a secular society. Religious identities determining social institutions can conflict with the secular and the absence of the latter makes society less democratic. If these issues and their implications can be openly debated without fear and the threat of assassination, it will make for a more vibrant society.

We are still in the process of internalizing, as it were, the essential institutions required for democratic functioning. Continuities from the colonial tradition as in some of our laws need to be assessed and where they are anachronistic (as many are) they need to be changed. Educational institutions, for instance, after half a century need re-evaluation. Such restructuring can only follow after intensive debates on form and content at all levels of education and the introduction of well-reasoned thinking, critical inquiry and new knowledge where required. As an exercise in pedagogy and social thinking this needs to be brought to the forefront in a transparent manner. That which defines education as information but also as a method of thinking analytically and of perceiving ourselves holistically is sadly absent in most of our institutions.

Democracy without its complement of secular thinking falls short of being a democracy. Secular thinking has to induct degrees of rationality and logic, as philosophical ways of thinking. Does it also motivate the natural and physical sciences? Scientists are often treated and treat themselves as different from the humanists and the social scientists. Their theories or their intentionality vis-à-vis society are seldom questioned, in part because the technicalities of the scientific disciplines are not easily understood by non-scientists, and in part because the mystique of science places it beyond the concerns of the human condition. These are issues open to dialogue.

I have given attention to the role of religion in the public sphere because it affects the possibility of a secular democracy. Let me reiterate that a democracy ceases to be so if it is governed by permanent majoritarian identities of any kind. This is not a matter of religion versus the secular but rather of how to consider where these become increasingly

a matter of personal concern. Whereas in the past religions practiced in the subcontinent have been enmeshed in the social institutions of caste, this now is undergoing change, as is caste itself. Where it is playing new roles as in vote-banks and educational reservations, its links to religion are likely to create other problems. In earlier times the state bestowed its patronage on any or all religions, now this will have to be withdrawn in a secular society. The adjustment in India is not limited to the dual role of what has been called 'the Church' versus 'the State', but requires a revision of the triangular relationship between the state, religions and castes. Even in the second millennium AD, caste was an important factor in state politics and the religious patronage of those in power.

The primary area involved in such a review would be the secularizing of civil laws that would need reworking into laws for citizens rather than collating diverse religious and caste codes. The ripples from this will likely affect the contents of education and access to resources. Secular laws would not follow the codes of the dominant culture but would have to be a reworking of civil laws.

Is asking questions sufficient or should a debate also be accompanied by facets of advocacy? My long introduction is an attempt to explain the need for enhancing reasoned thinking in order to strengthen democracy. I hope my essay, and those of the others in this book, will show why the articulation of public intellectuals is necessary.

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TO QUESTION OR NOT TO QUESTION? THAT IS THE QUESTION

ROMILA THAPAR

In order to try and define what I mean by the public intellectual let me begin by referring to the kind of people and ways of thinking from the past that contributed to the making of thinkers who were the 'ancestors' of present-day public intellectuals. I'll begin by mentioning a few persons from European history who were associated with the kind of thinking that has in modern times led to the emergence of the public intellectual. And then I'll mention some from the Indian tradition who played a similar role. There is no connection between the two but I think they are parallel in many ways. These persons were not public intellectuals in our sense of the term, but their thinking, speaking and writing legitimized the contribution of those such as Nikhil Chakravartty, who emerged as public intellectuals in modern times, if such legitimacy from the past was required. And finally I shall suggest what could be the role of public intellectuals in our time and why there should be a greater visibility of such persons in our society today.

Public intellectuals frequently concern themselves with issues related to human rights and to the functioning of society, such that it ensures the primacy of social justice. These issues

cover an immense span. I shall choose a couple from among them, those that I think have priority in our situation. One is what we regard as authority—whether it be religion, the state or anything else, and how we assess the choice. The second is how we draw upon knowledge and the use to which it is put. We must expect, for instance, that new knowledge would be defined in opposition to existing orthodoxies or well-established authorities, or as an alternative way of looking at a problem. How do we handle the denial of alternative ways of thinking where such ways are not patently false? This hinges on the primacy of reasoned, logical argument, in explaining the world around us as well as its past. In emphasizing the rational I am not expunging imagination as a process of thought, but the two are not similar as ways of acquiring knowledge and the distinction should not be ignored.

Such concerns are not recent. They go back to antiquity and were addressed many centuries ago. I shall mention a few people from the past whose thinking further legitimizes our right in the present to ask questions of those who are shaping our society. The fundamental catalyst for the public intellectual (and this was the title of the lecture on which this book is based), from the outset, was derived from the following principle: To question or not to question? That is the question. Once that question was answered satisfactorily, everything else followed. It is a principle that remains relevant to the present day.

In earlier times the questions emerged largely from rational argument and logical thinking, but were tempered by recognition of the human condition. The answers did not foreclose the imagined future of a better society on earth, and did not require us to wait for heaven, or the next birth.

Europe claims a tradition of such thinking. And its presence in Indian thought is generally not recognized. It has been deeply imprinted on us that ours was an idealistic philosophy drawn from intuition and meditation; by implication, the importance of reasoning and logic is often dismissed. But I would not be alone in contesting this dismissal. Societies invariably have to allow the questioning of orthodoxy and authority, at least at challenging moments, or else they rapidly become moribund.

IN EUROPE

Let me turn to the European past. The forerunners of the public intellectual indulged in philosophical questioning but this thinking also penetrated the political sphere and was reflected in suggested social action. Such persons claimed the right to critique authority even if on occasion they had to suffer for it, as did Socrates. The Athenian Greeks objected to his denying the existence of deities and to his criticism of the methods of justice in Athens. For this he was condemned to drink poison.

One important strand of European thinking however traces itself back to the Socratic method of the fifth century BC. In this method a statement was subjected to many questions, and was prised apart to observe the interconnections of its component parts. These could then be linked causally in a hypothesis and tested. A proposition counterposed by its opposite could lead to a dialectical form of debate.

The Roman orator Cicero, of the first century BC, who exposed the corruption of Roman governors, claimed the right to question whatever he thought needed to be questioned and used his legal brilliance to do so. This was suggestive of the direction that some legal studies would take later.

In the second millennium AD the Catholic Church wielded power over kings. This power was subsequently questioned. It was one of the issues that stoked European thought into the movement known as the Enlightenment. Philosophers, with whose names we are familiar—Locke, Hume, Voltaire, Montesquieu, Diderot, Rousseau, and others—began questioning conventional knowledge and practice. There were disagreements among them and with others, but by and large their questions were conceded because they drew on critical reasoning. This brought them together, apart from their common challenge to the moral authority of the Catholic Church, especially in matters concerning what we would today call civil society. The latter was now seen as constituted of essentially secular institutions, some run by the state. Religious exclusiveness and intolerance were viewed as backward. Progress, it was argued, lay in inclusiveness and the tolerance of differences.

The importance of the kind of thinking that is associated with the Enlightenment lay not so much in the surfacing of entirely new ideas but rather in the manner in which these ideas were correlated to suggest a new way of analysing the then known world. It was the entry to new cultural norms and ways of interpreting them by studying them afresh instead of falling back on existing explanations conducive to a relatively static understanding of society. Apart from the contribution of such thinking to the making of the modern world, it came to the colonized world via colonial governance and became a significant part of the colonial experience. As I've stated in my introduction, its significance is apparent both in the attitude of colonizers towards the colonized and in the way the colonized reacted to this attitude, in part by internalizing some aspects of this understanding and yet rejecting others. This dual reaction

continues in postcolonial nation states.

But to return to Europe: it was not because of wanting to oppose religion as such that the church was criticized but rather because of the opposition to the hold that formal religion had on the institutions of society—the family, education, property rights, governance and justice. The divine sanction of these institutions was rejected. Thus the source of authority for governance was said to be a social contract among people. Apart from other things an emphasis on reasoned analysis rather than on quoting faith made it easier to locate the mainsprings of social functioning, and to suggest changes in society where necessary.

However, the public intellectual, as distinct from these philosophers, is said to have emerged as a recognizable category in the nineteenth century, linked to what has been called the Dreyfus Affair. A Jewish captain in the French army, Alfred Dreyfus, was wrongly imprisoned on charges of leaking secrets to the Germans. Those opposing this action argued that the general staff of the army, in league with the politicians, had unjustly punished Dreyfus. This accusation written by Émile Zola carried the support of a large number of writers, artists and academicians, all of whom jointly came to be called 'intellectuals'. Eventually an enquiry, divorced from the prevailing mood of emotional anti-Semitism, declared Dreyfus innocent and reinstated him.

In the aftermath of the incident, the meaning of 'intellectual' crystallized around the notion that such a person need not be a scholar but had to be someone who had a recognized professional stature, and who sought explanations for public actions from those in authority, even if such explanations required criticizing authority and power. It becomes easier to

frame and ask such questions if there is a critical analysis of the intellectual tradition of the society. Basing arguments on accepted modes of reasoning involves verifying and analysing the evidence, even if the historical context changes the mode of questioning. (Incidentally, this method is now basic not only to the sciences but also to the social sciences, providing intelligible explanations of institutions and activities. Unfortunately, it is not always appreciated when applied to historical research as it results in the questioning of conventional views.)

The notion of rational argument over the last two centuries has, however, faced criticism. Its centrality was questioned in the statement that the premium on rationality cannot provide complete explanations, and that all explanations—rational or otherwise—are equally viable. However, critiques based on rational thought need not be aimed at a singular explanation and can be diverse, depending on the evidence and the logic inherent in causal explanation. This would still require a priority in evaluating the explanations and is anyway an advance on a single explanation based on belief. Although the idiom of critical reasoning may differ in changing historical contexts, critical reasoning itself can and does continue.

It is worth remembering that many of the roots of modern thinking, such as liberal values and democracy, by which we describe ourselves as not being medieval or feudal, go back to these debates among philosophers and others. Nor were the debates confined to Europe, since some of these ideas met with confirmation or rejection when they arrived in other parts of the world, initially riding on the back of colonialism. There was also a search for similar or dissimilar ideas in the past of one's own society.

IN INDIA

I turn now to the Indian tradition and randomly refer to a few persons who challenged existing ideas and practices and who advocated reasoned and logical explanations for change. The notion that our ancestors had no use for rationality as an avenue to knowledge has been so deeply implanted in us that we tend to ignore our heritage of rational thought.

The Indian philosopher who encouraged questions and who explored causality and rational explanations was a close contemporary of Socrates in the fifth century BC, although they lived continents apart and had no links. I am referring to the Buddha. The latter fortunately did not have to drink poison, but his teaching was strongly opposed by Brahmanical orthodoxy. It was described as delusional and misleading. This was one among many other reasons why Buddhism was slowly edged out of India. It went into neighbouring lands where it flourished, and in some places nourished, in its own turn, orthodoxy.

One of the most fascinating aspects of the history of ideas is the diverse ways in which societies explain their evolving structures. When asked about the origin of government, the Buddha explained that at the beginning of time there was a pristine utopia where everyone was equal and had equal access to all resources. The first change came when families were demarcated and became the units of society. Subsequent to this came claims to ownership of land as private property. These changes resulted in confusion and conflict. So eventually people came together and elected from among themselves one person—the mahasammata, the great elect—to govern them and to provide them with laws that annulled the chaos. It was effectively a social contract.

This Buddhist explanation contradicts the many Brahmanical versions. In these the story involves the gods and demons at war, and since the gods were faring badly they appealed to the great god Prajapati for help. In some versions he appointed his son, Indra, to lead the gods to a victory in war—in which action lie the roots of governance. Appeal to deities and divine sanction is essential and it colours the attitude to authority. The Buddha's notion of the 'great elected one' is in some ways the reverse of the idea of a king who was divinely appointed, concentrating power in himself. The assumptions in the two myths differ. Some later Brahmnical texts incorporate the notion of a contract.

Interestingly, the Buddhist origin myth does not involve killing people in battle in order to establish kingship. The question of whether killing can be or is necessary to righteous rule was an issue that seems to have been discussed in that distant past. There is a debate on this question in the Shanti Parva of the Mahabharata when Yudhishthira is disinclined to take up the kingship after the Pandava victory in the war. His objection highlights the fact that kingship involves battles and killing people. The epic introduces a character described as a rakshasa disguised as a Brahmana who calls Yudhishthira a wicked king because he has killed his kinsmen. While cursing him for this act the rakshasa states that he is unlikely to do any good to his kingdom. Needless to say the rakshasa is killed by the Brahmanas. It has recently been argued that the Bhagavad Gita was in part a reflection on the debate raised by the Buddhist and Jaina condemnation of violence. The Gita is concerned, among other things, with the ethics of the killing of kinsmen. The expelling of evil could require violence. This does raise the next question as to who defines what is evil. The

complexity of this question is reflected in Krishna's statement that women, Vaishyas and Shudras are born of a papa-yoni—literally 'a womb of evil' (...ye 'pi syuh papayonayah striyo vaishyas tatha shudras...) (9.32) and therefore are of low birth.

Religious texts intended for the public, as was the Gita, have a historical context as well, as they would, in some small part at least, be responding to the debates of their time. A pattern of debate evolved in philosophical thinking that was recognizable in many texts. One wishes that those who today propagate the need to abide by tradition would observe this pattern in debate. It has similarities with both the Socratic and the dialectical methods, but is not identical with either. When a matter comes up for debate, the first step is to state all the arguments of one's opponent with clarity and lack of prejudice. The next step is to state the counter-argument in the form of a refutation. The contradictions in the two having been considered, a solution may be arrived at. This is an eminently disciplined approach to debate, provided the arguments are reasonable.

When religion is referred to in these early texts, there is of course no mention of Hinduism—a term invented many centuries later. The multiple sects that constituted Indian religion are referred to by their individual names. When speaking generally they tend to get assigned to one of the two streams: Brahmanas—associated with Brahmanical belief, or Shramanas—representing Buddhist, Jaina and other similar teaching. (Shramana was the term used initially for Buddhist and Jaina monks, and came from the root 'shram' or making an effort, in this case to attain liberation from rebirth.) Religions are mentioned in this dual form for over a thousand years, from the edicts of Ashoka in the third century BC to

Al-Biruni's account of India in the eleventh century AD. The Sanskrit grammarian Patanjali, writing at the start of the first millennium AD, provides an additional perspective when he compares the relationship of the two to that of the snake and the mongoose. Clearly some debates could be sharp, as happens in societies where some believe unquestioningly in what they are told, but others raise questions.

And then there were the Charvakas also called the Lokayatas. They were opposed to most philosophical schools as they adhered to a materialistic explanation of life, making virtually no concession to other ways of thinking. No major text of theirs has survived, but references to them keep cropping up unexpectedly in various nooks and crannies of known texts. The Buddha describes the arguments of some of these sects as 'the wriggling of an eel'.

At the turn of the Christian era, when Buddhism had the patronage of royalty, traders, landowners as well as popular support, important Brahmanical texts registered an opposition to those who disagreed with them, describing them as heretics, referring to them as nastika—non-believers. From the Brahmanical perspective, the Shramanas, Charvakas, Ajivikas, atheists, materialists and rationalists, were all one category—nastikas. And this because they questioned the existence of deity, and therefore also of the Vedas as divinely revealed; the rules of caste practices; the existence of the atman, soul; and their varying views on karma with some rejecting the idea altogether. I am reminded of the current supporters of Hindutva for whom anyone and everyone who does not support them is a Marxist, irrespective of whether they actually are or not!

Manu's *Dharmashastra* is almost paranoid about the heretics, calling them atheists and preachers of false doctrines. They are

said to be like diseased men and are a source of tamas—the condition of darkness. It was in some ways a time of troubles for the orthodoxy given that there was a competition for royal patronage, and that some dominant schools of philosophy were striated with degrees of atheism. But that is what made it an intellectually exciting time.

The Vishnu Purana, of the early centuries AD, has negative references to Mayamoha and his followers. Delusion, illusion and deception, as the name Mayamoha implies, are characteristic of the group. Mayamoha collects all the evil ones—the asuras and daityas—and converts them to his way of thinking. Some of their practices point to their being Buddhists and Jainas. These include wearing red robes, removing bodily hair, not observing varna/caste rituals and living off alms and therefore breaking the caste rules of commensality. Discourse with them is not permitted, since such discourse is declared polluting. A record of such a dialogue would have provided immense insights into the relations between orthodoxy and the heterodox, but unfortunately only brief references survive.

The Charvakas continued to be part of the landscape even if not always directly visible. Shankaracharya in the ninth century AD refers to their theory of the primacy of matter over spirit. And the *Sarvadarshana Sangraha*, a discussion on major philosophical schools put together in the fourteenth century by Madhvacharya begins with a lengthy discussion on the viability of Charvaka thinking. Although he finally rejects it he nevertheless discusses it at some length. If the thinking of the Charvaka had been of no consequence, it could as well have been ignored. This, of course, did happen later in more recent times. Those that ask questions are anathema to any kind of autocratic authority. Similarly, those trying to build a single

national identity based solely on a particular religion, prefer not to concede the significance of teachings that contradict their orthodoxy.

The heretics were dismissed by the orthodox. However, some of their ideas and other similar ideas were explored in philosophical schools of the early centuries AD. At the scholarly level, discussions among learned Brahmanas and Buddhists gave rise to various impressive philosophical schools. Logic and methods of reasoning were sharpened, as were other methods of thought more sympathetic to idealistic philosophy. The major logicians at this point were, interestingly, largely Buddhist, such as Nagarjuna, Vasubandhu, Dignaga and Dharmakirti, some of whom had been born Brahmanas and educated accordingly but chose to be Buddhists. They teased out interesting ideas, and more so when discussing the nuances of atheism. Their views were not uniform and were widely debated.

What would have been of much intellectual significance but which is unfortunately difficult to locate, are conversations between philosophers using critical reasoning with astronomers or mathematicians, even more closely allied to rational thought. Aryabhatta argued that the earth went round the sun. The possibility had also been suggested by earlier Greek astronomers and mathematicians of the eastern Mediterranean but received little serious attention in Europe. Aryabhatta was an early mathematician-astronomer who argued this theory on the basis of a different body of mathematical calculations, and subjected it to serious discussion. This theory preceded those of Nicolaus Copernicus and Galileo by a millennium. In Europe the Catholic orthodoxy feared that these ideas would undermine the Bible and consequently the control of the Church on society. Galileo had to recant. What needs to

be investigated is whether heliocentrism, being a subject of much debate in India, where subsequent to Aryabhatta not every astronomer agreed with him, was as widely discussed as one might expect.

In India the wider implications in terms of how it posited the placement of humans in the totality of creation seem to have been bypassed. Was this because there was no Catholic Church to contest the issue? But if I may suggest another reason, adopting the heliocentric system would perhaps have upset astrological calculations. Astrology was one mechanism which, by its popularity, controlled various kinds of power. Old knowledge therefore continued in most places. However, Indian theories of mathematics and astronomy expanded creatively in their own space, but ironically appear to have become more influential when taught in Baghdad and other major centres of what might be called proto-science and the exchange of knowledge.

From the thirteenth century astronomy received royal interest and patronage in Central Asia. The Islamic world was somewhat divided on the issue of heliocentrism especially among the orthodox. This was the period that saw the construction of observatories in Central Asia and these were eventually to be the models for observatories in northern India as well.

In India, meanwhile, other sects provided an ambience in which similar questions were being raised. Scholars questioned beliefs and practices upheld by religious authorities and by those who governed; and popular teachers distanced themselves from orthodoxies. Some among the latter were women such as Andal, Akka Mahadevi and Mirabai, who flouted caste norms and created their own codes. They were listened to attentively

by people at large. But we seldom give enough attention to this aspect of their discourse, focusing as we do largely on religious devotion.

Amir Khusrau was not unknown to the Delhi Sultans. He provides a poetic view of court politics in his *Tughlaqnama*, composed in the fourteenth century, as a form of traditional history. His view of astronomy however, underlining a heliocentric universe, distanced him from some sections of orthodox Islam, as it implied questioning what were regarded as accepted truths. And again defying orthodoxy, it was his poetry and musical compositions that gave him a status and a following such that Sultans and the orthodox thought it better not to antagonize him.

A few centuries later Ekanath in Maharashtra also questioned the control exercised by formal religion. His variations on the *Bhagavata Purana* and the Ramayana defined his Brahmanical scholarship. This did not stop him from questioning orthodoxies, including those of the social order, and refusing to observe the code that required the practice of untouchability.

Almost parallel and a little later, in the early eighteenth century, Bulleh Shah was active in the Punjab. As the son of a reputed imam he was schooled in madrassas, but remained critical of the contents of such schooling. He thought that religious establishments whether run by mullahs or pandits did not provide the knowledge people needed to have. This was gained by questioning what one observed about people around us, and such observations required an understanding of the context in which people acted. Being opposed to caste, he was not deterred from choosing a low caste Arain as his chief disciple, but both this and his ideas that drew on reason

for explanations did lead to his being banished from his home community at Qasur.

APPROACHING OUR TIMES

Turning to modern times, the ideology of nationalism has made attempts to re-order society, as nationalist ideologies often do. Nationalism may have opposed colonialism but was not always averse to appropriating some theories from colonial scholarship. Social reform movements pertaining to upper caste Hinduism, such as the Brahmo Samaj, Prarthana Samaj and Arya Samaj, suggested new forms of Hindu religious organization and the role of caste. We are all familiar with Raja Ram Mohun Roy and socio-religious reform, but so little is said about his exact contemporary in Tanjore—Serfoji II, a minor Maratha raja. He questioned orthodoxy by focusing on the content of education. His reading of Enlightenment authors convinced him that knowledge was based on processes of reasoning and that these were taught through education. The schools he established were intended for this purpose, as were the books and objects that he collected for the Saraswati Mahal Library.

Although these movements were not intended to critically question prevailing and classical intellectual traditions, they did scrape the surface and occasionally more than that. Despite the centrality of caste hierarchies legitimized by religion, the interface between religion and caste was seldom investigated. In the nineteenth century Bal Gangadhar Tilak supported the Aryan foundations of Indian civilization and upper caste culture, even if, according to him, the Aryans did have to trek all the way from their Arctic homeland to India. But Jyotiba Phule saw the coming of the Aryans as a logical explanation for the oppression of the lower castes. For him the Aryans were

Brahmanas who oppressed the indigenous inhabitants who were the Shudras. Tilak extended the accepted view; Phule questioned it to explain existing society. Both readings were historically faulty, but Phule was asking an incisive question.

There were others who were also questioning the legitimacy of caste, and were critical of Brahmanical beliefs. E.V. Ramasami Periyar, or EVR, although not an academic, was known to be as well read as were his academic colleagues. He was critical of the contradictions in Hindu mythology, which, as a rationalist, he dismissed as fabrications of the Indo-Aryan peoples. He took a strong position in favour of social equality, and more particularly the equality of women. Needless to say his followers today do not hesitate to perform a variety of religious rituals.

The people I have mentioned were not public intellectuals in the modern sense. They were among those who questioned the existing reality with the intention of arriving at ways of improving society. They were listened to because of an interest in their views and because they were respected in their diverse professions. The point is not the similarity or otherwise of their questions, although many were touching on similar questions. It is the way in which they reasoned even if the nature of the questions changed in accordance with the issues of the moment. Such questions are not arbitrary. They have to be governed by acknowledged critical reasoning. And people who question, were and are, articulate at moments of significant historical change.

Moments of historical change often coincide with the exploration of new ways of ordering society, as has been happening off and on in the Indian past. With the research of the last half century, we now have more insightful ways of

understanding social and economic conditions and how they give form to society. These connections require exploration, and doubtless with changing methods of analyses our understanding will improve. Public intellectuals, playing a discernible role, are needed for explaining the necessity for such explorations as also to articulate the traditions of rational thought in our intellectual heritage. This is currently being systematically eroded.

For most of us heritage seems to exist only in monuments, in some objects from the past and/or in religious rituals. But we do have an intellectual heritage of thought/and ideas and actions. This heritage goes beyond monuments and rituals and often has universal characteristics that cut across religion and social codes. This is the heritage that we need to recover.

Such a recovery should not be limited to publishing accessible volumes on philosophical ideas, but also to ascertaining how ideas were tied to context and how both of these changed, registering a historical change. This would help us understand the implications of how ideas relate to society and change society. Orientalism and nationalism, by and large, focused on idealistic philosophy, spirituality and rather vague ideas of tolerance and non-violence. These need to be examined far more closely with reference to context. The counterparts of philosophical ideas based on reasoning and logic have to be given their due place. There were philosophers who did not conform to Brahmanical orthodoxy but made remarkable contributions to logical thought and rationality. It is equally essential that the ideas that we bring to the surface are those of all levels of society and not just the elite, although the elite has an advantage in this exercise since up to now it has been more literate than the rest and therefore we have many more of its compositions as sources for study.

THE EMERGENCE OF THE PUBLIC INTELLECTUAL?

Mainstream anti-colonial Indian nationalism and the emergence of a liberal democracy that was aspiring to be secular made space for the visible presence of the public intellectual in our country. More than a few took on this role, especially in the years just after independence. They were responsible for wide-ranging debates. Later events, be it the Emergency or the genocides of religious communities, heightened our awareness of the need for public intellectuals, if only to speak out and prevent a repetition of such events. We must remind ourselves that Nikhil Chakravartty and others who were his contemporaries opposed forms of censorship, and the attempt to silence alternative voices, and some of our fundamental precedents on these matters came from their resistance to being silenced. (A case in point being that of *Romesh Thapar vs The State of Madras*, 1950, which upheld the fundamental right of the freedom of speech and expression.)

Today, we have specialists in various professions, but many among them are unconcerned with the world beyond their own specialization. It is sometimes said that they are replacing the public intellectual. But the two are not identical. There are many more academics, for instance, than existed before. But it seems that most prefer not to confront authority even if it obstructs the path of free thought. Is this because they wish to pursue knowledge undisturbed, or because they are ready to discard knowledge should authority require them to do so? Or does association with national or international agencies require that critical assessments of social thought and action remain sotto voce?

Today, as always, the public intellectual is expected to take a position independent of those in power, enabling him or

her to question debatable ideas, irrespective of who propagates them. Reasoned critiques are often the essential starting point. The public intellectual has to see himself or herself as a person who is as close to being autonomous as is possible, and more than that, be seen by others as such.

An acknowledged professional status makes it somewhat easier to be autonomous. Such status brings with it another kind of authority, conceded, even if grudgingly, by professional peers and this does make some small impact on the non-professional world. The public intellectual of today, in addition to being of such a status, has to have at the same time a concern for what constitutes the rights of citizens, particularly on issues of social justice. And further, there should be a readiness to raise these matters as public policy.

The combination of drawing upon the professional respect that a person has garnered, together with a concern for society, can sometimes establish the moral authority of that person and ensure public support. This is a conceded qualification and not a tangible one. In the past it was those who had distanced themselves somewhat from society who were believed not to have a vested interest in the changes they were suggesting. Although this was not always so, we know that close associations, such as formal affiliation to a political party, can inhibit free-thinking and prescriptions for action, even if it has the advantage of providing a certain leverage to the suggestions being made.

As an attitude of mind, autonomy is more readily expected of the professional specialist or the academic. Such persons, and they are not the only ones, can suggest alternative ways of thinking, even about problems of the larger society. Their thinking should emerge from reasoned, logical analyses. Yet academics today are hesitant to defend even the right to

make what might be broadly called alternative, if not rational interpretations, however sensitively they may be expressed. This is evident from the ease with which books are banned and pulped, or demands made that they be burned, and syllabuses changed under pressure from religious or political organizations, or the intervention of the state. Why do such actions provoke so little reaction among many academics and professionals? The answer that is usually given is that they fear the instigators who are persons with the backing of political authority. But is this the only answer?

I was interested in the reaction to this essay when an earlier, shorter, version was delivered as a lecture. Although some people endorsed what I had said on the low visibility of the public intellectual, there were others who criticized the lecture as having presented a limited view of such a category of persons. The decline, it was said, is only that of the left-liberal variety (with the predictable jibe of these being jhola-walas), and that I should therefore have discussed the revival of the liberal right (the kantha-langota-walas?) in recent times. Apparently there has been a spurt of intellectuals belonging to the liberal right since 1991. My critics felt that the market for intellectuals today was, as with everything else, conditioned by the laws of supply and demand. To this was then added the view that public intellectuals have to be seen as symbolic goods in a marketplace, a description that seems to me to lack both sensitivity as well as comprehension of the wider question of how knowledge relates to society. I, for one, would certainly object to being described as a commodity, however much the authors of these arguments may be willing to be so described.

There is something of a contradiction in these statements. At the time of the post-Emergency Janata government, an

organization called the Indian History and Culture Society was established. Its membership consisted of those who claimed to belong to the liberal right, as well as those who supported the Hindutva ideology, and those who were members of the RSS. It was established as a counter to the Indian History Congress and the Indian Council for Historical Research, both said to be dominated by the left. Over the years the Indian History Congress has not only maintained its status but has grown in strength. This has not been the case with the Indian History and Culture Society. Whereas the Indian History Congress often had to function on a shoestring budget, this counter group was well-endowed by various agencies, including a grant from the Indian Council of Historical Research (despite the council being described as a leftist body). Was this a case of the not-so-liberal right being unable to sustain itself but attributing its decline to the dominance of the 'lefties'?

The neo-liberal economy should have boosted the liberal right after 1991. So why are the liberal right intellectuals still wandering rudderless in the marketplace? When the 'elitist lefties', as they have been called, were being hounded by the first NDA government on the issue of textbooks in the social sciences, and when the left liberals were arguing that textbooks should not be evaluated by religious organizations but by specialists in the subject, what was the liberal right saying? They were justifying the attack on the left intellectuals and arguing that since the former were dominant for many years it was now more or less the turn of the right—even if it was the religious right—to rule the roost. And obviously they would be expected to ban and pulp the books they disapproved of. Surely this is an oddly illiberal argument. A couple of years ago, when the Academic Council of Delhi University proscribed,

by an overwhelming majority, the essay by A. K. Ramanujan on the many versions of the story of Rama and the many Ramayanas, the support for the removal of the essay from the syllabus came from what would normally have been labelled as the liberal right. Were they still negotiating their identity in the marketplace or fighting 'the repression by elitist lefties'?

The definition of the liberal right almost always seems to go back several decades to the Swatantra Party and C. Rajagopalachari, and there it seems to remain. One wonders why the liberal right did not bid for a stronger presence in all these years. The early version of the liberal right, unlike what is called the liberal right today, was not entwined with religious identities as part of its political mobilization. It seemed to understand that it was an advantage if religion as political mobilization could be kept separate from liberal values since the two do not necessarily mesh.

Subsequent to the Emergency and from the 1990s there have been two occasions when the central government has been politically an avowedly right-wing government. On each occasion it has systematically tried to change the orientation of government institutions in favour of its own ideology and policies, which has also involved attempts to ban and burn books and silence people.Yet protests from the liberal right were hardly audible. Perhaps we have to look more closely at what constitutes the liberal right in our contemporary politics and see whether its constituents can nurture liberal values. Perhaps the liberal right will have to distance itself more clearly from the politics of religious identities in order to give itself the legitimacy of being called the liberal right.

The definition of the term 'liberal' is generally understood, and is not qualified. It is understood that there are degrees to

which liberals are left-oriented or right-oriented or centrist. However, in India, we insist on engraving one of the two qualifiers into the label. And it is the patronage of political parties that determines the qualifier. Is it assumed that opinions about governance and society must hinge on ideologies linked to political parties and as a result there can be no thinking about how to configure society in a manner that is independent of a necessary commitment to political parties? Surely in this day and age, it is possible to be an independent liberal in this country with ideological commitments that are not determined solely by political parties? Being a liberal is an attitude of mind that determines the fight for space in a society when that society resists ethics and reasoned thinking. The understanding of what one is battling for assumes an ideological direction but this does not require association with a political party. And there should also be the freedom to choose one's position on an issue and this position need not be in conformity with the ideological take of a particular political party on every occasion.

The public intellectual has, by definition, to be liberal, that is, to insist that there be space to present varying perspectives and that wherever possible, reason and ethics should have primacy in whatever debates are taking place. This is not a new definition and has been a recognizable part of the interface between knowledge and society since earliest times. Approximations to orthodoxy and orthopraxy have always been contested by similar approximations to heterodoxy although those leading the charge do not always have or need to have the same social identity. This is apparent among people and situations in the Indian past yet we have often ignored it or failed to recognize it.

An intellectual, even without being a public intellectual,

requires a more than average knowledge in his/her professional specialization and beyond that a familiarity with the context of that knowledge: how did it come about and what are the implications for the people who use that knowledge. To be a technician (or be technically accomplished) in a specialization, however good, is not sufficient. An intellectual perspective requires that the specialized knowledge one possesses should be related to social concerns where required and to other branches of knowledge as well.

Added to this it helps if that knowledge can be contextualized in an accessible way for a wider range of people to understand facets of the variegated world in which we live, and to which understanding the specialization contributes. The public intellectual uses such foundations in his/her thinking in order to extend the understanding of the world we inhabit, and to do so by insisting on space for debate and the right to informed opinion. This may well take her beyond her specialization to consider issues of public concern. As a thinking person she will obviously have an ideology. As with all ideology, it will become apparent through the way in which s/he looks at the world. But the issue is not about whose ideology wins among competing ideologies. The issue is about who succeeds in protecting that space, even if it has to be done through argument and non-violent opposition, and who provides a reliable explanation.

If academia is to be seen as a marketplace, then clearly the profits go to those selling the most sought after goods, namely management studies and the sciences. The social sciences, distinct from the physical and natural sciences that came to the fore in the twentieth century, raised questions related to the interface between knowledge and society in

which the ideological implications of scientific knowledge were also discussed by scientists with a variety of ideologies. Such discussions are less frequent now. And, coincidentally, scientists seem less concerned with the social implications of their knowledge and its applications. If and why this is so needs investigation. Do funding agencies, whether public or private, prefer that there be little or no discussion of where this knowledge could lead to? Is this one reason why a section of those who are producers of scientific knowledge remain quiet? Or is it simply a matter of the continuation of the two cultures where the scientists have little dialogue with the social scientists, and the function of the public intellectual is thereby eroded? There was a time soon after independence when Indian scientists were more concerned about the social context of their research than they seem to be now.

THE NARROWING OF THE LIBERAL SPACE

Many comment on the narrowing of the liberal space in the last couple of decades. Attempts were made to stave off the encroachments and now they are upon us again. Questioning those who represent conventional authority and demanding responsible action needs to be repeated again and again, especially where it involves a negation of justice. The social media were thought of as a free space and to some extent they are. But people now hesitate to share critical comments on religious activities or on contemporary politics for fear of action against them. Such action by authority has been taken in a few cases. More specifically, when it comes to religious identities and their politics, we witness hate campaigns based on absurd fantasies about specific religions and we no longer question these frontally.

Such questioning means being critical of organizations and institutions that claim a religious intention but use their authority for non-religious purposes. They invoke the rules and regulations of formal religion, sometimes recently invented, in order to legitimize their actions. Their actions may bring about murder, rape and mayhem. Few people pause to consider whether a strong objection to a book, such as that by Perumal Murugan, or the threat of censoring various films is really because of hurt religious sentiments of a small group of people. Could the actual reason be not religious sentiment but that the book or the film challenges a conservative social code or even that which is held to be such a code although it may not be so? In many cases what is actually being challenged is a threat to patriarchy. This cuts across all religions and remains to this day, in most parts of India, a basic social code. Even where patriarchy is not a norm it is beginning to be treated as such.

Many would maintain that the values of all religions are such that none preach violence. But that is not the issue. Of course all religions endorse virtuous values. But it is not the values that are under question, it is the beliefs and actions of organizations that act in the name of religion or claim to do so for religious purposes. We are only too familiar with organizations that claim to speak in defence of religion, be it Hinduism, Islam or Sikhism, but nevertheless have not hesitated to breed violence and terror. Communal riots are organized, killing many hundreds, bombs are exploded in congested areas so that many die, people who strongly endorse rational arguments are shot dead. Are we expected to believe that this is all in support of a religious ethic? Can the law be brought to bear against those who disrupt the law even if they kill in the name of religion? Although necessary, it is not enough just to

castigate such actions and rest at that. We have to understand why such actions, supposedly to defend religion, are resorted to and how can they be brought to a close.

A communal riot cannot be described only in ambiguous terms of the majority community and the minority community. The politics behind such activities have to be enquired into. It usually has a bearing on social conditions and the politics of various groups. This is something that the media stops short of in its preference for opaque or safe reasons. Can religion not be separated from the motivation of a riot and the event be publicly discussed in terms of the actual reasons as perceived by those on all sides who were affected by the event? If the media were to do this it may just decrease the intensity and frequency of the riots. Do others of the same religion as those rioting endorse rioting as a defence of their religion? And if not, should they not be defending the values of their religion by disassociating themselves from the perpetrators of violence and terror in the name of religion?

There are many reasons for the decline of the public intellectual. I can only mention some. The most obvious but least conceded of these seem to be insecurities of various kinds. Some are generated by the neo-liberal culture. These have arisen out of the so-called economic boom which seems to have misfired. Jobs have become far more competitive and this adds to existing aggressions and reduces the premium on harmonious human relationships. In the competition for jobs accompanied by the still increasing population, identities of caste and religion became major qualifiers.

Disparities in wealth, described by some as obscene, further the aggressions. Values are being turned to tinsel with the endorsing of ostentatious display. Most professions have a mafia,

some of which are not so effective, while others control the system. Even those whose work it is to protect society in various ways are sometimes controlled by the more powerful mafias and these networks are widespread. Corruption of various kinds and at various levels has become normal. Money is the new deity lavishly worshipped among those that have it. The rest wait anxiously for the trickle down. The excitement of having the right to demand equality, a new experience for the underprivileged, is threatened by the new versions of caste and money power that have entered elections and politics.

The neo-liberal economy has, according to some commentators, diverted the move towards an equitable society. Strangely, in the quarter century of its existence, it seems not to have given the expected confidence to what is referred to as the liberal right. The latter continue to complain about the imagined continuing control of the liberal left.

The neo-liberal culture and economy cannot be easily changed but its ill effects can be reduced, provided we are clear that society must be rooted in the rights of the citizen to resources, to welfare and to social justice. This after all was the issue at the time of independence when the nation state was created. I can recall the arguments and debates in the 1960s and 70s on how we should create a society where citizens have equal rights, not just in theory but in actuality. If such discussions are to continue, and questions be raised, as they should in a vibrant society, then we have to turn to public intellectuals to bring them to the fore. But beyond that, it also needs a public that would regard the asking of such questions as appropriate.

TO CREATE A DISCERNING PUBLIC

How can we create a public that is aware of what needs to be discussed and why? A public that would respond to questions drawn from critical reasoning? The response does not invariably have to be in the affirmative, but at least the issues for discussion can be put forward. It assumes, for a start, an educated public. How should we be educating ourselves? This would involve the participation of professionals in various disciplines and many public intellectuals who in part draw their alternative authority from their professional standing.

In the absence of proper educational facilities being available to all, we are dependent on other sources for obtaining information, and on learning to think about this information. One source is the informal indirect visual media as an oral form. The intermediary here is the Internet, but at present its catchment area cannot include society as a whole. Information in itself becomes a source of power. We are now so dependent on certain technologies that even misinformation can become a source of power, as for example, the mix of high quality information and garbage that goes into the making of electronic media. It is necessary therefore for people to be given the awareness to discriminate between useful material and nonsense.

As with the Internet and social media, so it is with the visual media. TV channels, with rare exceptions, imitate each other with panellists playing musical chairs on the channels and trying to shout each other down. Everything, but everything, is seen in terms of current politics, even where this may be irrelevant. So, much of the time goes in the speeches made by the inevitable spokespeople who have to hold forth. Some who clearly cannot sustain the argument go manfully off the point relying on a loud voice and rapid-fire delivery. The result is

that serious issues are more often not discussed in meaningful ways. A recent 'debate' is a case in point. The demand by a Hindu group that Muslims should be disenfranchised was being discussed. However, it did not adequately analyse the fact that the demand was motivated by local politics and amounted to an attack on the Constitution. What was at issue was not just religion but the rights of the citizen. The discussion may have been more pertinent had the subject been posed as to whether this was an attempt to redefine citizenship. This is an extremely serious matter with wider ramifications than religion alone.

Seldom do programmes investigate the reality beyond their own statements. If the Naxals are in the news, why can't we have more people from the tribal areas where the Naxals are active telling us why they do or do not support the Naxals, or their perception of the reasons for a particular incident taking place? Why can't we see more of their living conditions and what the state is doing or not doing for them so that we too can form some independent opinions about what is happening in these areas? Why is the discussion dominated by the predictable views of party spokespeople, and the usual commentators from Delhi who pronounce on everything and some of whom indulge in outpourings of verbiage that amount to little? Can we not hear the opinions of other citizens from these regions?

When the Dongria Kondh tribes defend their sacred hill Niyamgiri from being destroyed by a corporate company, we should hear much more from those protecting the hill. Niyamgiri is their sacred hill that they worship. It is the equivalent of the temple to the Hindu and the mosque to the Muslim. To allow it to be mined is like permitting a temple or mosque to be destroyed. This is never explained to the

viewer because we regard tribal societies as far less important than ourselves. If according to law the idol in a temple has legal rights of ownership over the land on which it stands—an issue that was raised with reference to the idols found in the Babri Masjid—then can these rights be denied to the deity symbolized by the hill? What is the legal position, if any? The Kondhs are equal citizens of this country, so can we deny them the same rights simply because these were not granted to them in colonial times, whereas temple deities were granted such rights? What is the technical difference? What, we may also ask, is the validity of rights in abstraction to entities that have no physical existence?

Practically all the TV channels have a sameness to them and one inevitably asks whether this is because they are financed by corporates whose ambitions in doing so are identical; or whether, among those who man the media, there is only a scatter of sensitive thinking people who want to use, not all but some of the media at least, to explore the various aspects of the problems that come up in our society. Is it not possible to have even a single alternative channel on TV that is not either entirely commercial or financed by the state? It could be a channel that functions only at prime time for a few hours every evening, but gives space to an alternate view of what is happening. If this is difficult to finance, then even a radio broadcasting station, which is not solely concerned with commercial profit would be welcome. This would be a space that encourages the exploration of alternative ideas and solutions, and goes well beyond the single byte, and draws its inspirations from a critical enquiry. Some websites on the Internet do host alternative views and encourage discussion, but these are not readily reachable by anyone wishing to read

such views. The social media could play this role and does so up to a point. But the required control over abusive language is not possible and some use it just to vent spleen. How do we finance the voice of those that do not merely want to exploit the present, and are thoughtful about the future of our society?

The other source of information for society or the public—that of formal education—has to be analysed at two levels: the content of education and the autonomy of educational institutions. Education is moving out of the hands of educationists and into those of politicians, bureaucrats and cultural and religious organizations with strong political agendas. This makes it crucial to be aware of how politicians today relate to intellectuals—if at all they do. As I've remarked in my introduction, there is a substantial change in the qualities that currently mark those that enter politics as a career and hold responsible positions and those that did so fifty or so years ago. Sensitivity to the educational process is not so apparent these days, to put it mildly. Educational qualifications in themselves do not necessarily qualify such people but there should be more comprehension of the purposes of education.

Ideally, the essence of learning lies in enabling a person to think in forms that are analytical, logical and autonomous, not to mention creative. This applies to every aspect of learning. Thus, for instance, it is only by using the power of reasoning that an educated person can be made aware of the fact that knowledge, where it takes the form of a technology, has a particular context that produces that kind of knowledge and sustains it. A technological invention cannot take shape if nothing existed before. Specific technological inventions of the twentieth century can only have been made in our times because there was pre-existing knowledge just prior

to it, duly recorded, and that made the technology possible. Such inventions cannot have existed three thousand years earlier without the technical and associated knowledge that is required for each invention. So instead of claiming that modern discoveries of science and technology made in the West had existed in ancient times in India, it might be more to the point if we asked some pertinent questions about India instead.

If the Kerala mathematicians discovered calculus in the fifteenth century as historians of mathematics have suggested, then what stopped these mathematicians from making the leap into modern science, as indeed was done by Newton a little later? This question is pertinent to understanding a body of knowledge in Kerala at a particular point in time, and its social and intellectual context.

Or, there is the question that the science establishment in India could be asking: namely, why is it that Indian scientists working in Indian centres of science in recent times do not get awarded Nobel Prizes, as they do when they work in western centres of science? What inhibits innovative, autonomous research in our institutions? Is it because of the control exercised by the bureaucracy and the government over these institutions that inhibits questioning existing knowledge? Is this also somehow related to the self-perception of scientists? There is also the other question of scientific work and its social context. This remains separated in the way we teach science, sometimes giving it an aura of obscure knowledge, almost esoteric. One misses its connection to various human concerns. I am often puzzled by how few scientists in India pick up the debates that were once provoked by the writing of J. D. Bernal or Joseph Needham, or J. B. S Haldane, or more recently the analyses of Thomas Kuhn. Or for that

matter even the more popular writings of Stephen Jay Gould or the controversies raised by Richard Dawkins. Science is not something that happens out there. It is embedded in the societies that practice it. The specific issues raised in these writings may not be immediately pertinent but their broader context and the questions addressed have a resonance. These need to be widely debated if science is to be seen as it should, as more than technology and invention.

At the initial stage, education provides information of existing knowledge. The next step is to assess whether there is a need for replacing existing knowledge with new, improved knowledge through the process of learning. This is not a question merely of opposing existing knowledge but of analysing it in the light of new knowledge. The educational system as it works today in India, with rare exceptions, does not even get to the first step in most schools. Some suspect that the acute shortage of schools and the poor condition of those that exist is conditioned by the fear of various governments that a citizenry that is not only literate but educated will not be easy to keep subordinated. It may of course simply be an inability to understand the value of an educated citizenry. Hence, the atrocious neglect of school education in the last half century. Education is invariably among the lowest ranked items in the budget. And even when we say that our goal is development, the expenditure on education does not increase, rather it is cut, as has been recently done. Why don't we recognize that even the quality of the much talked of 'development' will change dramatically if we have a properly educated citizenry?

There is virtually no preparation for secondary school, leave alone college and university, in terms of both acquiring information and knowing how to handle knowledge.

Nevertheless, we are rushing to open more Central Universities, IITs, IIMs and what have you. Inevitably this situation leads to diluting education to the point where it becomes almost meaningless—in fact to reduce it to the lowest common denominator, what might therefore be called 'LCD Education'. Institutes of advanced learning are now complaining about having to admit ill-educated graduates to whom they have to give basic training before they can proceed with post-graduate work. Universities are institutions where existing knowledge is assessed and, if need be, revised, and certainly brought up-to-date and where new knowledge should be created. We are busy destroying the education infrastructure that exists rather than augmenting it and making it better.

The current move is to bring in an Act whereby all Central Universities, almost fifty of them, will have a standardized uniform syllabus, centrally controlled, taught to students admitted through a central admission process, taught by teachers, again recruited through a central organization, and then allotted to various universities. Such a degree of centralized control has in the past been associated only with totalitarian societies, and even in these some diversity eventually had to be conceded. This ensures that there will be no room to either experiment with a different perception of knowledge or relate it to local needs in diverse ways.

The attempt is to make everyone conform to one body of information. Inevitably, that will be dictated by those who are without specialized knowledge—politicians and bureaucrats. It doesn't take much to predict what that body of information will consist of. Those that have knowledge also know that it has to be periodically assessed and critiqued by those professionally involved in creating it. And the latter are never bureaucrats

or politicians. They are invariably teachers and researchers working in the disciplines that constitute knowledge. But in the proposed system it is not the professionals who will debate and determine the contents and methods of teaching and research, but those who are, as likely as not, unfamiliar with the frontiers of knowledge in any subject.

We tend also to bypass critical questions that affect not only our education but our ways of thinking. A language reflects the kind of society that is using it. The experiment with making Hindi the national language has not succeeded. The young today are most comfortable in their own regional language and these languages have effectively become the medium of instruction in every state. Yet the crisis is that unless they know English, their information is generally out-of-date since new research is not translated fast enough or even adequately, and translations are never sufficient for graduate work. They also have problems with assessing knowledge since such assessment does require a comparison with knowledge from non-Indian sources. The example of Japan handling one aspect of Indian studies is apposite. Some Japanese scholars, for example, have done fine studies of Sanskrit texts that they publish in Japanese and in English. Publishing in English is to ensure that the work is accessible to scholars outside Japan. This does not in any way detract from the continuing tradition of Japanese scholarship in Sanskrit studies that remains admirable.

Training in technical professions requires more than a minimal understanding of English. To rely on translations, as everyone knows, goes nowhere since immediate translations of current books in at least half a dozen or more Indian languages would be impossible. The problem with translations is always that of reliability because translation requires a high degree

of expertise in both languages. In a multi-lingual country, the requirement of a level playing field in terms of a language, with communication across the nation and a high degree of technical proficiency, requires a medium of instruction that may be the regional language as well as a facility in using a single common language for trans-regional communication.

Increasingly today, on an all-India count, the two languages generally thought of as appropriate for this purpose are the local regional language and English. Hindi would be objected to by the large number of non-Hindi speakers who would see the enforcing of Hindi as a disadvantage to them. English would be more neutral to all and now has the advantage of being an international language that in any case has to be learnt for any research in the sciences and the social sciences. National sentiment comes in the way of adopting English, yet the demand for it is substantial and it is amazing how quickly we have already converted it into a language with a distinctly Indian idiom. Can we not think then of introducing bilingualism in school of the regional language and English, where an adequate knowledge of English would be an advantage particularly in education beyond school. Additionally, bilingualism makes one language respond to the other, with the interchanging of concepts that, as we all know, goes towards enriching both languages. Nor would it be an alien experience, as languages of wider communication since earliest times in our society have often evolved out of bilingual situations.

For most young people the methods of thinking that are essential to the nurturing of enquiring minds and those that might resonate with thinking citizens and public intellectuals, are stymied by the very system of education. One is thankful that there are some who do manage to think independently

and creatively despite the system. But they don't add up to the critical mass that we require. Imagine what an energetic, thinking society we would have if we allowed ourselves an educational system that asked questions and provoked thought.

By way of a concluding thought one might ask: what are the issues that could be raised by contemporary public intellectuals? Here are a few that could be considered. Our clinging to a bureaucracy that is lethargic and has not shaken off its colonial training of carrying out orders that have to come from above; a bureaucracy that is required to protect and assist the citizen, but rarely does. To this has been added the parallel system of treating corruption as normal and necessary. The unjust distribution of national wealth and lack of development in essential areas keeps a high percentage of people below the poverty line. Caste and religious priorities still prevail using the same categories that were created by colonial policy, even where these categories have been shown to be inappropriate. The colonial administration invented majority and minority communities through census data, and encouraged the identity politics of religion. Identity politics is now extending to caste. As permanent categories, these disallow democratic functioning because in a democracy those that make up a majority are not permanently such, are not identified by a single category, and change from issue to issue.

Reservation in education and employment retained on a permanent basis reiterates these religious and caste identities whatever the marginal benefits of reservation may be. It cannot be a permanent solution with more and more quotas rippling out. We might end up in a nightmarish situation where everyone demands and is admitted to educational programmes under one quota or the other. The solution actually lies in a

different ordering of the society and economy, an ordering that requires government to be caring about citizens; it should foster institutions that are directly connected to safeguarding basic human rights. This should be done through a willingness to invest heavily in civic and public schemes that will ensure the welfare of the less privileged, and that the advantages provided by institutions be shared by all. A substantial investment in making primary and secondary schooling compulsory by subsidizing those that cannot ordinarily afford it, and by greatly improving the quality and content of teaching is likely to ensure a far higher quality at the tertiary level. This would reduce the current wastage of resources at these higher levels. I am not making these suggestions as a blueprint for the future of society, but rather as issues for public intellectuals to debate.

The ultimate success of a democracy requires that the society be secular. By this I mean a society that goes beyond being satisfied by insisting only on the co-existence of all religions; in a successful democratic society, members would have equal social and economic rights as citizens, and would exercise these rights irrespective of their religion; it would be a society that is free from control by religious organizations in the activities related to these rights; a society where there is freedom to belong to any or no religion and a society that would give priority to human rights.

In order to ensure that we become such a society it is essential to define or redefine secularization and make the secularizing process essential, as well as explaining where secularization lies and why it is inevitable in a democracy. A greater familiarity with the implications of constitutional rights vis-à-vis other identities might be salutary in telling us how far we can go in using religion or caste for political gain.

Public intellectuals are not absent in our society, nor are they alien imports. They do have some approximate although not direct predecessors, as I have argued. Historical change requires us to recognize that their role, although not entirely dissimilar to that of earlier intellectuals, nevertheless needs to be extended in our times. Their predecessors added new dimensions to understanding our society. They were nurtured subconsciously by earlier heterodoxies and some in dialogue with orthodoxies that explained the human condition through rational and logical argument; and by exercising a secular moral authority over those that controlled society; and closer to us in time, by negating colonial dominance. Public intellectuals drawing on critical reasoning are the inheritors of this bequest.

I would like to conclude with a long question. We are not bereft of people who can think autonomously and intelligently and ask relevant questions. But frequently where there should be voices, there is silence. Are we all being co-opted too easily by the comforts of conforming? Are we fearful of the retribution that questioning may and often does bring? How can we create the independent space that will encourage us to think, and to think together?

TO QUESTION AND NOT TO QUESTION: THAT IS THE ANSWER

SUNDAR SARUKKAI

Romila Thapar in her provocative essay about the role of the public intellectual poses a question about questioning—to question or not to question? She then suggests that there have been critical traditions, ranging from the early Indian ones to the European Enlightenment, which emphasized questioning. Following which, she argues for a more critical role of public intellectuals and finds it distressing that academics in India have not been able to step into this position in a meaningful manner.

In this response, I will restrict myself to a reflection on the nature of questioning and whether Thapar's call to question needs to take into account certain fundamental characteristics of the act of questioning.

There are two simple points of clarification that I will start with. One is that the term 'question' is used both as a noun and verb—there are entities that are called 'questions' and there are particular actions of questioning that fall under the term 'to question'. The former denotes a set of sentences called questions while the latter is about certain cognitive processes and about certain intellectual attitudes. 'To question' is often reduced to a set of questions but to have a questioning attitude is to be able to do something more. For example, asking

questions like 'What time is the bus?', 'Where will we meet?', 'Which courier do I use to send the letter?' are actions which are meant to produce particular kinds of 'correct' answers. Asking a question as a critical attitude is not to produce certain kinds of answers but to be involved in a particular process of 'thinking'. The questions that Thapar is referring to are not the kinds of questions given above, rather she's talking about those that capture the spirit of questioning with a critical sense, particularly towards authority.

It is also important to understand that questions are not just given but are generated for a variety of reasons and it is essential to know these reasons before we enquire into the status of questions. We could ask a question to get some information, to decide what to do, to plan an event, to resolve a doubt, to take a stand against injustice and so on. All these motivations are not equally critical, they are not what adds value to the act of questioning. When Thapar is invoking the phrase 'to question', she is pointing to the value of certain kinds of questioning.

It is interesting to note that the title of Thapar's essay is itself in the standard form of a question that arises from doubt. Questions that are normally catalysed by doubt are generally of the form: Is it p or q? The function of the 'or' is extremely important in this formulation. My response replaces this 'or' with 'and' but the implication of this is far more than a mere replacement. The logic of the question is in the disjunction 'or', which is often understood as exemplifying choice. 'Or' is the default word for choice and questioning can easily become an act of shopping in a mall filled with all kinds of questions. In a sense, unbridled questioning often ends up as 'consumerist questioning'. The logic of 'or' has a robust truth value since

'a or b' is always true whenever at least one of them is true.

The logic of 'and' is more restrictive. It is impossible to conjunct two sentences without imposing a strong sense of truth condition on them. The most important principle of logic is the principle of non-contradiction, which is nothing but the logic of the 'and': both p *and* not-p cannot be true simultaneously. So the answer I give as the title of this essay—to question *and* not to question—might seem contradictory. However, if we take into account the fact that the term 'question' is used in two different ways, then we can see why the answer is not contradictory since the 'question' in the first part of the phrase refers to the act of questioning and 'question' in the second part refers to what we accept and need in order to question. In other words, questioning as an action is possible only if we do not question something else at the same time.

In this context, we must also remember that it is quite impossible to not question at all since our cognitive state is forever responding to a state of doubt. So the most unthinking person still doubts, thinks and questions since she has no other choice. But she can remain 'unthinking' if she does not ask the question: 'What should I question?'. It is this question that elevates the act of questioning from a mere biological response to a more reflective mode of thinking.

At the same time, however, common wisdom often makes fun of people who keep asking questions constantly. We cannot keep asking a question about every ordinary act that we do: doing this might lead us into scepticism, solipsism and paralysis of action. Meaningful questioning, by its very essence, needs a space of quietude before questioning is possible. So the answer to Thapar's question is precisely this: we need to question

and at the same time not to question, and this is the nature of any critical questioning. What are the implications of this fundamental nature of critical reasoning?

DOUBT AND THE ORIGIN OF QUESTIONING

First, we should recognize that questioning is our default cognitive mode. But this capacity for questioning is in a dialectical engagement with another core human faculty: habit. On the one hand, we question through habit, and on the other hand, we follow through habit. We question for a variety of reasons but most importantly questioning becomes 'natural' when it is catalysed by doubt. We doubt what we see and what we hear, for example, and questions arise in response to these doubts. So one could say that the first and most important impulse to questioning is through our experience of doubt.

The fact that doubt is a central component of human experience was understood by almost all Indian philosophical traditions and in a slightly different manner by René Descartes, the seventeenth-century French philosopher. Descartian doubt has been called methodological and hyperbolic doubt since he begins by asserting that everything should be doubted till the doubt can answer itself in the act of doubting. He begins by doubting everything that he had learnt, everything that he sees till he comes to a point where he realizes that he cannot doubt himself doubting. From a normal cognitive act, Descartes elevates doubt to a methodological category, thereby showing how true and certain knowledge is possible through this conscious and active process of doubting. It should not be a surprise to discover that doubting as a method is closely related to questioning.

As is well known, the Descartian method was extremely

influential. The possibility of challenging authority is also related to the methodological and hyperbolic method of doubting since it makes doubting of textual authority not only a methodological possibility but eventually a methodological necessity. While it would not be correct to identify this view of doubt as leading to the overthrow of religious authority in Europe, it nevertheless allowed a philosophical justification for the same and played its part in the growing discourse of the autonomy of individual reason in Europe. The role of doubt and certainty in the larger project of Rationalism should also be noted; Descartes, along with philosophers like Gottfried Wilhelm von Leibniz, Baruch Spinoza and Nicolas Malebranche, was an important influence in promoting rationalism as a doctrine. Interestingly, the principle of the divine played a central role in the philosophical doctrines of all these rationalist thinkers.

I mention this intrinsic relation with the divine among these rationalists because I want to contrast this approach to doubt and critical questioning with another tradition much before Descartes. The Nyaya tradition in Indian philosophy, often seen as a rational, realist tradition, right in its earliest formulation understands doubt as an important category of philosophical analysis. As with Western rationalism, the end goal of certainty is common to both these traditions.

Nyaya develops an interesting theory of doubt. Philosophers belonging to this school point out that enquiry only begins with some doubt but at the same time they argue that without some prior knowledge there can be no doubt. That is, they do not accept doubting for its own sake and also disagree that doubts can arise in a vacuum. The standard expression of doubt, according to these philosophers, is a statement of the

form: Is S 'p' or 'q'?, which is precisely the form of Thapar's question. There are certain constraints that should hold if this is indeed a true doubt: 'p' and 'q' should be incompatible and they should both refer to the same subject, S.

Nyaya also classifies doubts about perception into four types: doubt arising from the perception of common characteristics; from perception of uncommon property; when there are conflicting testimonies; and about the reality of perception per se. Similarly, we also have specific types of doubts about inference; the extremely complex formulations of the pervasion relation exemplify this attempt to remove doubt in inferential cognition. So also in the case of language use. Given that there could always be doubt about the meaning of a word, the Naiyayikas introduce a technical tool of delimiting, whose use clarifies the possible doubts in the exact meaning of a word.

The Nyaya formulation of doubt, which is central to the idea of philosophical method, differs from the Descartian one in many ways—most importantly in the impossibility of authentically having methodological doubt. We cannot continue to doubt once our initial doubt is resolved and we cannot continue to doubt when practical implications of an action suggest otherwise. In other words, these philosophers rejected the possibility of continued questioning since the resolution of doubt is a cognitive episode which occurs when the doubt gets resolved. Gangesa Upadhyaya, the twelfth-century philosopher, for example, points out that doubt is opposed to habit and when regular pattern or habit is present, there will be no doubt. The rationalism of Nyaya shows an alternate understanding of doubt, which also leads to a different epistemological strategy with respect to the act of questioning.

A modern philosopher who has close affinity to the Nyaya

view is C. S. Peirce, the American pragmatist, who offered a strong critique of Descartes' methodology of doubt. Lesley Friedman points out that there are two senses of doubt in Descartes. First, we should note that for Descartes, the method of doubt is the path to indubitable truth. In fact, Descartes himself uses the method of pretending in order to deal with dubitable beliefs. Even his argument for the indubitability of existence uses the notion of pretending: 'I saw that while I could pretend that I had no body and that there was no world and no place for me to be in, I could not for all that pretend that I did not exist.' Pretending, as Freidman notes, is a 'psychological device to trick ourselves' into 'pretending that our opinions are false'.

As mentioned earlier, the very notion of enquiry is understood as a process to remove doubt. But like the Nyaya assertion, Peirce too argues that Descartes misunderstands the nature of doubt. Like the Nyaya argument, he maintains that doubting can only begin when it is based on other 'initial beliefs', what he calls 'habits of expectation'. Genuine doubt arises through the feeling of a sense of doubt and only through genuine doubt can one have genuine enquiry. As is obvious, this argument is strikingly similar to the Nyaya argument, since both of them begin from the claim that doubt has to be cognized (or 'felt', in Peirce's terms) and genuine enquiry can only begin from these experiences.

For both Peirce and Nyaya, action is the final check of the genuineness of a doubt. Doubt stops one from knowing how to act correctly. In the Descartian methodology of doubt, belief can be distinct from action because certainty lies not in action but merely in attaining knowledge. In both, unlike for Descartes, doubt is not to be seen as a wilful act and does

not arise artificially through decisions to doubt.

SCIENTIFIC RATIONALITY AND METHODOLOGICAL NON-QUESTIONING

Thapar invokes science just as many others do when they discuss this attitude of questioning. Science's questioning of authority has now become a truism in popular histories of science. While I do not want to get into the merits of scientific rationality I only want to point to an important aspect of it that gives us a more nuanced way of understanding the act of critical questioning.

Scientific enquiry is based on the possibility of questioning while at the same time not questioning. This is what distinguishes it from scepticism. Scientific questioning occurs largely within paradigms, theories, models and an established framework. While paradigmatic jumps might radically change a scientific theory, very often, new scientific insights, and the concomitant overthrow of authority in science occur not necessarily because the authority was questioned but only because of the recognition that there was a flaw in some structure of the earlier accepted theory. In other words, far more than critical questioning, major scientific discoveries that have overthrown authority have occurred due to a critical and creative imagination that is open to many different interpretations. Thus, the work of the critical *imagination* is perhaps as important as critical questioning in the creation of new science.

Many times theoretical work in the sciences often builds from the imagination of 'what if'. Enquiry begins by asking: 'What if this were the case?'. The 'what if' question is the fundamental question of imagination and one that brings

together artistic and scientific imaginations. This mode of enquiry, the imaginative 'what if', is not what is commonly considered to be critical questioning but it should be seen as an integral part of critical rationalities. If we accept this, then we have to take into account not just the work of sceptics and other critical thinkers but also the deeply influential work on the imagination in Indian traditions.

The capacity to question, and in general to be sceptical, is primarily an attitude and not a cognitive skill as such. Such an attitude can be cognitively difficult to sustain in all seriousness and this is the reason why every critical enquiry ultimately depends on some basic foundational beliefs that sustain that enquiry. One of the primary reasons for an inability to sustain this sceptical attitude is the energy one needs to constantly question. Thus, we need to consider the importance of not methodological doubting but methodological non-doubting, the attitude which makes us live our lives without constantly questioning. There are varieties of non-questioning ranging from faith, habit, ignorance, indifference, pretending, and so on. Paradoxically, these modes form the foundational bases that make critical questioning possible, including in the domain of science.

Consider religious faith. In all the dominant world religions, theology as critical enquiry has been a fundamental component of religious faith. These religious discourses are built from deep and fundamental questions which are critically raised. It should not be a surprise, therefore, that theology as philosophical enquiry can critically engage with the question of the possibility that God does not exist. If we look at important philosophers ranging from Sankara to Ramanuja to Thomas Aquinas, we can discover a critical discourse dealing with modes of questioning

faith. The fact that religion as practised in public and as a political institution dispenses with these critical approaches is a different matter altogether.

Another term close to this idea of religious faith is 'ideology', although it has a different historical trajectory. But what is common to both these terms is that they are both grounds that enable a critique of certain claims. While there are important differences—particularly in the claims of critical intervention in society—between religion and ideology, they both offer a foundation for critical questioning if the attitude is present.

In this context, it is worth mentioning an interesting essay by B. K. Matilal called 'Scepticism and Mysticism'. In this article, he asks an important question: 'Why did the sceptical tradition form a very important, and almost an inseparable, component of the major mystical traditions of India?' He goes on to add that the 'spirit of scepticism'—this spirit of critical questioning—'can be carried on to the fields of morality, religion and politics'. This spirit is not about demolishing all beliefs and truths but more about the 'justification or rightness of certain principles, concepts or ideas'. He then goes on to discuss three philosophers who he believes could be called sceptics—Nagarjuna (c. AD 150), Jayarasi (AD 800) and Sriharsa (AD 1100)—representing three different philosophical traditions.

There is a lesson about the nature of questioning in these sceptical/mystical traditions that is relevant for the idea of a public intellectual in contemporary times. A sceptic is part of a debate but does not have to assert and defend any of his or her own positions. As a consequence, the sceptical mode of questioning illustrates what the price of critical questioning can be, namely, the impossibility of holding on to any foundational

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grounds in the project of true critical questioning. And, interestingly, these philosophers only show that scepticism and mysticism are not necessarily opposites and thereby show us ways to understand sceptical reasoning better.

Habits, as mentioned above, are also central to human action. Almost all our acts are out of habit and being in the habitual mode allows us to function without paralysis. Just as there are physical habits, there are also intellectual habits, which are habits that inform the very practices of reading, thinking and writing. They allow for a critical engagement with theories and texts without having to reinvent the wheel every time. Thus, one can have a very critical engagement with a scientific theory without having to question its foundational beliefs every step of the way. I have seen innumerable physicists who continue to do quality work in physics without really questioning their understanding—or lack of—of basic concepts like mass, space and time. So perhaps the basic question is itself this: what are the foundational beliefs that we are willing to accept (without question) in order to critically question what we want to question? Such an approach is essential whether or not it relates to the foundational beliefs of science, religion, art and so on.

Ignorance is also an important methodological influence for a non-critical attitude. Very often, one does not even know what to question. Or how to question meaningfully. For example, questioning whether the world is real can easily become a pretend question since we may really not know how to proceed further with that question. Once we ask a question just as a form of questioning, then what do we do with it? What are the resources needed to sustain that questioning? Ignorance is an important mode through which

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action is possible; some wilfully decide not to know, a mode that can be characterized also as indifference. Both ignorance and indifference, we should remember, are important human modes of responding to critical questioning and when practised as attitudes become methodological attitudes of non-doubting and non-questioning. Very often, these modes are influenced by some practical ends—somebody does not want to know something because they might think that it would hinder their action. Thus, the relation to action, which is a core argument for Peirce and Nyaya, is also the reason for certain attitudes of non-questioning.

Ignorance is also used by authority to stop the questioning by claiming that if one does not know the basic tenets of a discipline, then one is not qualified to critically question it. Thus, non-scientists are often told that they cannot question quantum theory (or some tenets in it like wave-particle duality, for example) if they are ignorant of the scientific description of that theory. In every specialized discipline, practitioners normally take such a position about their specialized knowledge. However, many believe that they can hold opinions on matters in disciplines like history or sociology even when they have little knowledge of these subjects. On the other hand, science has not only escaped such interventions from the outside but has also cultivated the notion of ignorance and specialization to protect it from such interventions.

It is important to seriously take into account these modes of methodological non-doubting because any questioning is possible only against the backdrop and support of states of non-questioning. In this sense, ideology (loosely used here as a set of beliefs one is committed to and through which one interprets their experiences) functions as the foundation of non-doubting

that makes possible critical questioning. As I mentioned earlier, this remains a constant problem since sceptical questioning would challenge the authority of ideology itself. What this also entails for critical questioning is the need to seriously explicate the modes of methodological non-doubting and understand their importance in human action.

However, other than the modes of methodological non-doubting, there is another way to understand the very nature of critical questioning. This has to do with the often implicit use of binary logic that is so much a part, and problem, of assertions. Often, our questions and answers are closely related to binary logic. Even if answers are not merely yes or no, the answers still work within the framework of a binary logic in which there are two possibilities against which the answers are evaluated. Critical enquiry that challenges this binary logic is a very interesting way of expanding the nature of questioning. I am thinking here of Jaina logic, which is well known for its seven-fold predication and the standpoint view. I would argue that Jaina logic challenges standard accounts of critical questioning even while remaining an exemplar of critical rationality. In fact, the most important critique of the questioning attitude is the inability to find common discursive frameworks to discuss the foundational beliefs from which all questions arise. The challenges to certain beliefs arise not necessarily because of the lack of an attitude of critical questioning alone but more because a lot of investment is needed—both cognitive and affective—to find common frameworks to debate seemingly incommensurable foundational beliefs.

Over the years, I have seen this clash of foundational beliefs repeatedly played out between different groups, like the scientists and those in science studies. The sometimes

unbridgeable gap between scientists' view of science and the views of philosophers of science only reinforces the difficulty, not of critical questioning per se but critical questioning of the foundational beliefs upon which daily habitual practices are based.

Here is where the Jaina view offers a refreshingly new way of approaching this problem and a potential rapprochement when there is a conflict of widely differing beliefs. The Jaina logicians distinguish seven different ways of qualifying an assertion: specifically, they insist that the 'syat' qualification must be added to assertions. This qualification translated variously as 'maybe', 'under certain conditions', etc., highlights a simple fact—that every assertion is true only under certain conditions, including 'obvious' statements like 'this table is brown'. As a consequence, the statement that 'this table is brown' is true under certain conditions, not true under certain conditions, and perhaps not expressible under other conditions. If we invoke this form of reasoning then we can see how to negotiate a clash of contrary foundational beliefs. When there is such a clash, it is often the case that there are assertions which contradict each other. The inability to deal with these contradictions leads to violent clashes at one end or the consolidation of beliefs at the other. Thus, I would argue that the inability to deal with two contradictory claims must be taken into account when we discuss the nature of questions and answers. The 'syat' qualification can be a powerful tool to meaningfully engage contradictions since it has the potential to exhibit the conditions under which the assertions of different belief systems are made and sustained. *And the most significant meaning of critical understanding is nothing more than the knowledge of these conditions and presuppositions under which an assertion is made.*

ETHICS OF QUESTIONING AND THE PUBLIC INTELLECTUAL

One can take as a truism the claim that critical questioning is absolutely necessary for being a public intellectual. A public intellectual, in my view, is one who is able to bring critical questioning to matters of interest to the public. But in what sense should a public intellectual be a 'criticalist'? Should it be as a sceptic or as an ideologue? Can she question others while being uncritical about her own positions? Thapar's essay and the discussion on public intellectuals identifies various elements of what it is to be a public intellectual, ranging from criticism of authority to being involved in matters of social justice. I would like to suggest that these many tasks and roles of a public intellectual can be unified together in a particular mode of being a public intellectual.

How does one actually act against authority? What is the public intellectual's unique claim to knowing what is right and wrong for the larger society? Unless the framework for these actions is clearly set out, the utterances of a public intellectual will get subsumed under ideologies of various kinds. So what a public intellectual *today*—in emphasizing today I also want to draw attention to the historicity of this concept—needs, more than anything else, is a sense of intellectual honesty. A public intellectual has to present herself first as a member of the public and then as an intellectual. There is an intrinsic tension in the notion of the public intellectual: often, it is as if this individual is outside the public but speaks for the good of the public. Thus, a sense of intellectual honesty will be a constant reminder that the public intellectual speaks as just another member of the public and that she cannot demand of the public anything more than she can demand of herself. More than in any other activity, a public intellectual has to

be seen to embody what she stands for—doing and writing cannot be disjointed acts. This is also what distinguishes the public intellectual from a teacher of the public. A teacher can still do an excellent job of teaching something without necessarily doing that thing well—for example, a coach need not be a great player but can mould great players. But a public intellectual is not in that position and she has to embody the virtues she desires of others.

How does one do this? The simplest way is to declare the grounds upon which one speaks from—this is the first sense of intellectual honesty. As I concluded in the last section, through the perspective of Jaina logic, critical understanding of anything is perhaps nothing more than the explication of the conditions of one's utterance and not the assertion of specific truth values of assertions. If that is the case, then the most basic action of a public intellectual can only be to explicate the grounds and presuppositions under which any social claim is made. What this implies is that the public intellectual cannot decide for the public. The ethics of being a public intellectual is to let the autonomy of the individual decide what s/he wants but at the same time create enabling conditions that will lead the autonomous individual to move towards the position of the intellectual. There are not only cognitive challenges in this act of being a public intellectual but also ethical ones.

In addition to the above, there are various other ethical themes that are central to the notion of a public intellectual, specifically related to the possibility of critical questioning in the public domain. An important point in Thapar's essay is the need for critical questioning in the public domain. But this raises the issue about the difference between the critical questioning of oneself and of others. It is important to

distinguish between critical and methodological questioning in the case of individuals as against groups. At one extreme, we have groups of individuals who follow certain beliefs 'blindly' and on the other we have extremely aggressive questioning as best exemplified by the media. The insulting, aggressive questioning of individuals by the media on camera, going beyond all boundaries of what was once seen as polite social behaviour, is a kind of questioning which is not based on any norms. The very act of critical questioning is fundamentally in opposition to accepting norms of questioning since authority can get established under the guise of polite norms of behaviour. Even as I accept this potential problem, I would also insist that there have to be different codes for questioning one's own individual beliefs and questioning the beliefs of others.

In the first instance, why would we want to critically question other people's beliefs? We can do so only if these beliefs inhibit or otherwise influence our action in the public domain. Why should the beliefs of an individual in the sanctity of his/her house matter to others? These should matter if these beliefs clash with that of others when there is social interaction. A solution to this clash of beliefs does not lie in critical questioning but in finding ways to critically and conceptually understand the basis for the beliefs in others. This may not be the most efficient way to deal with differences but it is necessary if our notion of the public is to be an ethical conception and not just a utilitarian one.

Since Thapar's essay is primarily a call for a critical public questioning, it is important to take into account the ethical dimension of critical questioning itself. (In fact, the emphasis on critical questioning of everything, along with the lack of an ethics of questioning, has allowed the question of ethics

to be sidelined as far as scientific knowledge is concerned, thereby leading to serious ethical issues around the generation of scientific knowledge.) The formation of a public is itself based on ethical norms and thus any notion of critical questioning of the beliefs of members of this public must involve a different approach. The act of questioning—as an individual and by an individual—is different when undertaken in the context of the public. To express it differently: *I cannot question others as I can question myself.* The mode of critical engagement with my set of beliefs is different from critical engagement with the beliefs of others. However, this does not mean that we cannot critically question the belief systems of others but only that we need a set criteria—acceptable to both parties—that can help adjudicate the terms of the debate between these parties.

Thus, there are two ways of understanding Thapar's argument about the role of critical questioning in the public domain. One is to exhort individuals to critically examine their own foundational beliefs and the other is to understand the grounds on which there can be a critical examination of the beliefs of communities and groups by those who may or may not belong to these groups. Here, I would reiterate the simple observation that certain conditions are necessary under which one can question; these conditions are not only political but also epistemological and ethical. Since the very act of questioning is based on certain foundational beliefs, which are often insulated from questioning, the basic question about questioning is this: how do we question the foundations on which we stand and yet continue to stand? If one questions without the foundational stand, then it leads to radical scepticism and we can say, following Nyaya as well as Peirce, that such scepticism is not tenable in the face of practical human action since it is not even a real

doubt or a genuine question. A particular form of rationality might assume that we have the right to question anything and everything. A more nuanced approach will have to justify the belief that we have the right to question whatever and however we want.

In Indian philosophical systems, there was a well-established methodological strategy to deal with debates between opponents who held contradictory positions, which was to describe and analyse an opponent's view before one's own position was argued for. This is part of a communicative ethics that is applicable to the ethics of the public. It might be useful to consider whether such strategies can become part of the ethics of a public discussion.

Finally, we need to distinguish between two ways of engaging with the other: through questioning the other and through imagining the other. Both these ways of perceiving and engaging with the other are extremely important in public discourse. Excessively focussing on questioning tends to grasp the other in one particular way—for example, as an object of analysis and of judgement. To me, the notion of judgement is the fundamental ethical problem. Questioning, in its essence, is about judgement. Critically questioning others very soon leads to forms of judging others. It is not that judgement per se is wrong, for, after all, there are many acts which we should perhaps judge as being wrong. But the intrinsic relation between critical questioning and judging leads to a potential conflict as far as the task of the public intellectual is concerned. Being a public intellectual is to find ways to take *positions* about certain acts but not in a judgemental manner. How is it possible to do this?

It is here that the second way of engaging with the other,

through imagining the other, becomes important. Imagining the other is a different mode of accessing the other. More than 'knowing' the other, which critical questioning might enable, imagining the other leads to 'understanding' the other. I will draw upon an image from dance to illustrate what I mean. A leading dancer and choreographer, Jayachandran Palazhy, defines the task of dance as being able to go beyond the limits of the body both in perception and action. For example, when a dancer stretches her arm, the focus is not on the arm but on something beyond it. All the work towards that movement, including breath, goes towards bringing the focus of the dancer to a point beyond the extension of the hand. This capacity for 'going beyond', which for Palazhy is a central element of the imagination of dance, is the one that I want to invoke in the imagination of the other. Using this image, I would say that 'imagining the other' is always to go beyond the immediate boundaries of the other, both in terms of their physicality and in terms of their action. Literally, this would mean that the task of imagining the other is always to see beyond the other, to always see more than the other and the actions of the other. This 'going beyond' of the imagination can happen both in terms of spatial as well as a temporal extension. An essential task of the public intellectual is to exhibit and elaborate those domains that constitute the 'beyond' of a social act. If 'understanding' (following a long tradition in the social sciences) is indeed more desirable than 'merely knowing', then it is essential for a public intellectual to privilege both these modes of questioning and imagining the other.

I would extend these requirements not just to a public intellectual but to public citizenry. And the only way to meaningfully fulfil this expectation is to invoke the opposite

of questioning, namely, habit. The very notion of the public is defined by habits—social rituals are expressions of habit. Thus, I would interpret Thapar's point about the need for public intellectuals as being equivalent to a call for cultivating certain kinds of habits. And the two habits that are essential are those of questioning the other and imagining the other. Once these modes become habits, then social and public discourse will automatically change. If they successfully become a social habit of a society, then such a society will not need any public intellectuals but until it happens, the role of the public intellectual is to keep attempting to inculcate these habits.

Perhaps this then is the real essence of a public intellectual: someone who acts to create a public in which her role will become redundant and unnecessary.

SCIENCE AND DEMOCRACY

DHRUV RAINA

In one of his last books, the scientist turned science policy analyst, John Ziman, wrote: 'Science is under attack. People are losing confidence in its powers. Pseudo-scientific beliefs thrive. Anti-science speakers win public debates. Industrial firms misuse technology. Legislators curb experiments. Governments slash research funding. Even fellow scholars are becoming sceptical of its claims... And yet, opinion surveys regularly report large majorities in its favour. Science education expands at all levels. Writers and broadcasters enrich public understanding. Exciting discoveries and useful inventions flow out of the research laboratories. Science has never been so popular or influential'. Similarly, Allan Bloom in the *The Closing of the American Mind* pointed out that the central question of our times concerned the triangular relationship between reason, science and the human good.

In this response to Professor Romila Thapar's paper I shall focus more on the contemporary world of science, and argue that the institutional transformation of science over the last couple of decades has altered the relation between science and the public as well as the critical discourse on science and society. The larger concern that links the argument of this essay to Professor Thapar's question is that scepticism has been

considered a core and implicit norm guiding scientific practice; it is around this that philosophers of science have constructed the edifice of critical rationalism. The point I would like to argue is that in our times, the implicit connection between the norms of science and the democratic process can no longer be taken for granted. A consequence of the decoupling of the two might mean that science could require a democratic infusion from the outside.

The standard tale about the rise of modern science commences with a challenge that the sciences posed for the orthodoxy: it is a tale about seeming blasphemy, heresy, incarceration, even an auto-da-fé; and yet, at the end, the truth of science prevails, despite some equivocation, because men of science abided by the dictates of their commitments to knowledge, and their methods. Historians of science over the last couple of decades have done much to revise and nuance this portraiture for us, but the origin myth, once installed, is difficult to dislodge and continues to inspire devotees of science and amplify the imaginary of science as the voice of critical reason. So powerful is the imaginary that as and when there appears to be an epistemic or methodological drift evidenced in scientific controversies or when 'science is called to the bar', it is this voice of critical reason that is evoked to adjudicate over the transgression of a norm.

What does this recurring appeal to reason entail? Why is it so valued? For one, it is argued that there is in this appeal a commitment to disinterestedness about our claims that transcends personal gain, and that this questioning itself seeks to ground so-called good reason in equally robust principles. This in turn involves the recognition of two value judgments. The first relates to the importance of giving good reasons in

public discourse that in turn is premised on the intrinsic merit of certain principles (perhaps democratic ones) over others.

Without traversing the historical distance between Galileo and the subsequent rise of Newtonian science in the making of modernity, in the so-called battle between the 'ancients and the moderns' in European history, it could be argued that science was frequently evoked as offering not just a critical lens but a method for making discoveries, which in the voice of that combatant of reason, Voltaire, outnumbered the discoveries of the past. It is not our task here to debate whether the philosophers were guilty of overkill. The more important point is that from Voltaire and Denis Diderot and Jean le Rond D'Alembert from the decades preceding the French Revolution to François Arago, from the post-revolutionary era, the savants were not just popularizers of the new sciences (vulgarisation des sciences), but participants in public debates not just of the place of science in society, but of the kind of society they wished to create. This is the sense in which Roland Barthes counts Voltaire amongst the festive combatants of critical reason. It is this conjuncture of reason and revolutionary politics of the subsequent decades that has framed progressive political theory, as well as provided us with the spectacles through which we examine our discourses, not just about science and society, but of utopian thinking.

The foregoing discussion requires a brief clarification, then, on what we mean by 'reason' beyond the capacity for explaining and justifying existing beliefs and commitments. In particular, when we speak of historical reason or scientific reason, there is an evocation of special methods, sources of information and specific knowledge-related practices. These practices privilege logical inference and controlled observation over just mere

inference and perception. The success of these protocols makes of scientific practice the exemplar of reason.

If for the philosophers and the savants, the voice of critical reason and experimental method could not be disentangled from their thinking on society and politics, it could be ventured that the unconscious of science—assuming as philosopher Sandra Harding says that science does have an unconscious—was drawing it in another direction. As if it were drawing it away from the socio-political, so much so that late-nineteenth-century histories and philosophies of science began to reflect upon this notion of science as disembodied reason. In a more speculative vein, the movement of this unconscious of science certainly had the effect of jettisoning itself from the socio-political in order to reinforce its claim to universal and objective knowledge. Cognitive and social movements, positivism and logical positivism appear as a family, since they were programmatically guided by the attempt to reduce human knowledge to scientific principles founded on the notions of universality and objectivity. However, this act of dissociation returned to haunt the world of science after the First World War and its aftermath. But this time around, the ideology of scientific neutrality had firmly anchored itself within the social imaginary.

Did the scientists carry the burden of the misappropriation of their results either by capitalist or totalitarian regimes? This dilemma forced J. D. Bernal and left-wing scientists to redress the issue of neutrality through larger movements of socially engaged scientists and scientific workers—a legacy that much later inspired the people's science movements in India. Across the Atlantic, around the same time (1938), the sociologist of science Robert Merton was characterizing science with

social virtues, such as communitarianism, disinterestedness, originality and scepticism. In other words, there appears to be a return during this period to an older idea, but naturally in a varied formulation, and reshaped by a new social context. In the United States, the philosopher John Dewey reckoned with the scientific method as a meaningful instrument for resolving political questions, of doing justice to the integrity of experience and thereby linking philosophical instrumentalism with democracy. Thus for Dewey and others for a long time the 'commonwealth of science', or the norms of the related 'republic of learning', could serve as a general model for a participatory political democracy. It is within this chain of argumentation that Sheila Jasanoff reiterated the parallel between science and democracy:

> This is no accident, because the very virtues that make democracy work are also those that make science work: a commitment to reason and transparency, an openness to critical scrutiny, a scepticism to claims that too neatly support reigning values, a willingness to listen to countervailing opinions, readiness to admit uncertainty and ignorance, and a respect for evidence gathered according to the sanctioned best practices of the moment.

The point where our contemporary understanding departs is that these social virtues are not the characteristics of science alone but, as Jasanoff suggests, were historically the products of the co-production of modern experimental science and the 'rise of democratic accountability in politics'.

In twentieth-century India, from the period of late colonial rule to the last decade of the twentieth century, there was thus a significant tradition of socially engaged scientists who

emphasized the relationship and parallel between science and democracy—though there was a period when scientists tended to go over the top in asserting that the direction of influence was from science to democracy. This tendency was quickly checked due to the pervasive culture of debate on science and society issues—a climate sadly threatened today. In fact, the democratic space itself was an arena for debating not just the critiques of science but one where scientists examined and reflected upon the premises of their scientific practices and the large development project of the times—a tradition extending from Meghnad Saha to Homi Bhabha, D. D. Kosambi to Satish Dhawan to C.V. Seshadri, A. K. N. Reddy and Madhav Gadgil; and within the science and alternate science movements. In today's context, it is this tradition of debate we appear to have lost, and it appears as if the scientist as public intellectual has all but disappeared. Amulya Reddy was fond of saying that Satish Dhawan frequently referred to him as the social conscience of science. Amidst this absence of public voices of science, where the scientist speaks in the interest of the citizenry rather than the state, one wonders where the social conscience of science hides.

Without attempting to trigger nostalgia about a lamented world in a fast-changing political economy, I would like to offer an account of the institutional transformation in the world of science—a transformation in which the scope for criticism and scepticism is limited. In other words, the question is not whether this is good for society, but it could be asked whether it is even good for science. In other words, what is not good for science is not necessarily good for society. A question posed by Helga Nowotny many years ago was whether good men could do bad science. The answer from the history of

eugenics and the last century is obvious. The important question remains—what can be done to revive a culture of democratic questioning within this world of science?

One of the features of the Mertonian paradigm was the recognition of the unique place of the norm of originality—by centring originality as a central norm, the departure from mainstream thinking within the world of science was valorized and did not endanger the tradition of science. As a social system the Mertonian paradigm did not allow for profound changes in the social ethos of science, which meant that while the structure was stable, the valorization of originality or the deviance from the norm was idiosyncratic. In any social system, John Ziman reminds us, the moral order is marked by a creative tension between its norms and the corresponding *counter-norms*. The Mertonian norms were increasingly difficult to conform to and, often enough, were in conflict with group loyalty and cohesion. As a result the Galileos, Sakharovs and Orlovs were in their time portrayed as traitors and not the heroes that they subsequently became. Again, I recollect several discussions with Amulya Reddy who was often flummoxed by the rapidity with which any criticism of science, from within the scientific community or by affected social groups or communities, gets labelled as anti-science.

The central concern then in the world of science as much within the university system is the question of the autonomy of pure research. The issue again is that the systemic transformation in the world of science and research has altered the relation between science and the public and raises concerns about the possibility of democratizing the culture of science. The issue manifests itself in a two-decade-long discussion and research engagement with the changing social contract

of science. Characterized by uncertainty, at stake is not just the accountability of the world of science but that of social responsibility. The absence of voices of dissent or the decline of the dissident imagination, it could be argued, within the world of science is an outcome of the transformation of the self-regulating system of science into a system of instrumentalized commoditized production—though the canvas of that process of transformation is nowhere near complete or total. This historical transformation whose spirit runs so much against the grain of Karl Popper's much-celebrated construction of the philosophy of science as critical rationalism, needs to be understood both internally and externally. Many of course would ask whether the influences from within science can actually be separated from those emanating from society. While science is social through and through, the distinction evades the reduction of the complex cognitive aspects of science to purely sociological or political categories.

Underpinning the challenge to the autonomy of science is the substantial increase in the funding of science and the broadening of its activity base, as a result of which external pressures have begun to trump the self-regulating mechanisms compromising autonomy as the natural right of the researcher. Studies on the nature of science and society were themselves inaugurated by the amplification of the intensity and complicated linkages between the scientific and social. Some of these studies had their roots in academic professionalism, while an equally important genealogy has been inspired by movements committed to engaging with 'the social responsibility of science' and have been labelled critical or activist. In India, again, we do know that this intellectual legacy has played an important role in shaping the public culture of science and creating a system

of checks and balances on matters of science that have deep and long-lasting social and environmental impact. Some of these concerns did not merely relate to state level issues—such as the Silent Valley debate or the location of Kaiga, or the Narmada Bachao Andolan; but related to national and international issues as well. The cosmopolitical aspects of science became increasingly emphasized in the post-1950s period as scientists and social movements grappled with the global fallout of not just nuclear power, but equally central issues of natural resources and environment. Activism and the protest movements relating to the same did not merely render visible the vulnerabilities of affected groups but equally enriched the sciences themselves; something which has been recognized within the sociology of science, where the new social movements around science must be counted as the generators of scientific knowledge. One can on this count only marvel at the role played in India by the Centre for Science and Environment—not just as citizen science but equally as science itself.

In other words, citizen science as well as the social studies of science interrogated the political economy of science in order to foreground the interests and welfare of people, communities and social groups. The critiques of science on both sides of the Iron Curtain during the Cold War recognized a convergence across the ideological divide to a middle ground compromise between dirigisme and self-regulation. As a result, much of policy discourse and the subsequent public imaginary of science is framed either by ignorance of the potential of science and respecting the scientific communities self-professed adherence to the idea that science is an internally structured system of cognitive enquiry; or by the other idea that science and technology are anchored in a form of rationality that privileges

their instrumental side alone. These were the central polarities of the debates on science and society in the 1930s, where the liberals endorsed the freedom and autonomy of science. The Bernalists, on the other hand, proposed a science of science to plan for science in the long run. In other words, science was part of a larger social context. The middle ground mentioned became symptomatic of the contractual relationship between science and society, wherein the fundamental or pure sciences would be granted full autonomy and applied science would be socially mandated and related to practical social goals. The proximity of this socially mandated science to technological applications ensures that it draws a large quantum of funding, not to mention the linkages forged with the media to popularize its results. Extended exposure to the media has itself altered the internal self-regulating norms of science. The goals of these new forms of knowledge are not so much concerned with arriving at the general laws of nature or generalizable theories; the source of their validation and the forum for priority setting is not so much the seminar room of the university but the consultancy, think tank and even the board room of large corporations. The nature of this science has been discussed in sufficient detail in *The New Production of Knowledge* and its sequel. But during the incipient phases of this transition in the world of science, philosophers of science began to recognize that under such conditions there was an impending epistemic drift in the standards of validation.

The problem is a serious one. It even merited an editorial in the science journal *Nature* recently. The editorial was interestingly entitled: 'In the Beginning', clearly an allusion to the new social technologies of science invented with the establishment of the Royal Society in the seventeenth century.

The editorial began by celebrating the 350th anniversary of the first and longest running scientific journal—*Philosophical Transactions*, run partly as a journal, by 'people of inquiring mind' who had cast off the shackles of received wisdom and asked questions of the world, and partly as a magazine, seeking support for the scholarly pursuit of a better world that could not be taken for granted. But the editorial warns: 'The Library of Alexandria was targeted and destroyed at various times between 48 BC and AD 642. For those inclined to dismiss such wanton vandalism as ancient history, think of the continuing efforts by many in the United States and elsewhere to sweeping away science ranging from climate change research to evolution... the forces of irrationality are gaining in strength—one cannot afford to be complacent'. Rather than see it merely as the expression of the anxiety of the British scientific community, it would be more fruitful to see it as the resistance to a larger systemic transformation.

A little later another editorial appeared in *Nature* entitled 'Communication Breakdown', sounding the alarm bells following an amendment of the Civil Service Code in the UK, requiring ministerial authorization for scientists speaking to the media. The Association of British Scientific Workers naturally protested the strictures imposed on scientists speaking to the media. The editorial commented in the run-up to the British elections that for most parties, '[s]cience is unlikely to be a priority... *Scientists...should find their voices again. And governments should not muzzle them*' (emphasis added). And the UK is not alone. As the editorial remarks, the voices of scientists and academics are being muzzled in Canada as well. I recently received a communication from a senior colleague at a Canadian university. The professor writes: 'I had to remain

in radio silence since Monday. Following a draconian freeze on our salaries and huge cutbacks at my home institution, our government is now passing a new "Universities Revitalisation Bill" which will remove workers' rights to unionise, bargain or file grievances, and declares that all research and teaching must be oriented towards industry and entrepreneurship.' This sounds so close to home. We don't have to travel very far to encounter the stifling of the voice of science and certainly citizen science in the country. Greenpeace may now be coerced into shutting down. Anticipating the science/democracy separation, Bruno Latour rhetorically asked how the sciences can be brought into the democratic process. According to him, one way of comprehending the decline of political ecology is to map the powerful interests that lined up against it. Equally, as a widespread movement it has been unable to compete with 'the age-old practice of politics as usual'.

How does this influence the autonomy of science, which in any case is a relational concept whose meaning varies with context and time? There is no general rule for guaranteeing autonomy because at any given moment it is constrained by a complex web of institutional structures and policy environments. To illustrate the complexity of the issues involved, we do have historical precedents wherein epistemologically independent science has been pursued in particularly oppressive conditions. As historians and sociologists of science have noted from time to time, scientific research systems are confronted with a crisis of legitimation or sometimes even dysfunction as happened in India in the 1970s. The crisis itself is a product of the creative tension between autonomy that is premised on the legitimation of science on internal grounds and heteronomy on the other where external justification is sought in terms

of socially beneficial results. Intellectuals speaking in the name of science and striving for the self-regulating norms of science then must defend autonomy either on the basis of the Weberian ideal of the autonomy of science's social goals or find arguments that provide evidence of technological or social relevance while attempting to preserve the space for the pursuit of 'autonomous science'.

At least over the past two hundred years a great deal of scientific research has been pursued within the university, till recently the primary site for the production of knowledge. And within the context of the university the autonomy science has gained is through a process of regular disciplinary differentiation: in the seventeenth century from the religious, and later from the philosophical as well. This system of the production of knowledge, endowed with some degree of cognitive autonomy, encountered its limits in the third quarter of the twentieth century. But the complex web of knowledge itself and the rise of the new modes of knowledge production have also rendered it close to impossible for any one scientist to speak in the name of science. Within the Anglophone world, some scientists have bemoaned the rise of science studies that they feel has epistemologically deprivileged science. While that is a debatable point, what science studies certainly did do was to reveal the plurality of scientific traditions and methods. The success of science through hyper-differentiation has reduced the expertise of the scientist who speaks on issues of science and society to a very small window of the scientific canvas.

A matter of concern today is the precipitous decline in the democratic culture of science in the subcontinent. The inability of the scientific community to cope with the democratization and expansion of the social reach of science has reinforced

certain authoritarian tendencies within the scientific community, sometimes expressed in the assertion of their rightful and sole claim to scientific expertise. This undermines science's ability to adjudicate between several alternatives. The internal differences and controversies within science reach the public through several media conduits where media moguls themselves become agenda brokers, not just of well-established political constituencies but of their own interests. The importance accorded to the authority of science derives in part from the imaginary of value-neutrality. As public controversies related to science proliferate—a sign of the socialization of science—one misses the voices of democracy and dissidence within the world of science. In such a world, where are the expert dissidents—the Indian Sakharovs—who are committed to critically examining the relationship between science and society? This absence may itself impede the conversations as it did in the past between different kinds of expertise and cultural resources available within society.

I would like to end this response by talking about a lecture by a 'maverick scientist' whose absence many of us bemoan today. In 2000 Amulya Kumar Narayana Reddy delivered the Saadat Hasan Manto Lecture in New Delhi. The subject of the lecture was prompted by a meeting on Energy Assessment in Poland that Reddy attended. While in Poland he took time off to visit Auschwitz and Birkenau. Reddy, or Prof as he was known to those of us who worked with him in Bangalore, had been quite disturbed for a long time by the critics of science and technology and was constantly in the process of rethinking his own understanding of the subject. The visit to Auschwitz was an eye-opener inasmuch as he reckoned that the ostensible divorce of values from technology produced

'Technology for Violence'. As he was to write: 'Shaken by the scene of genocide in Auschwitz, I began to think of historical parallels. In particular, I wondered whether there was a difference between the Nazi concentration camps and the development of the atomic bombs at Los Alamos, the test at Alamogordo and the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki resulting in the virtually instantaneous annihilation of hundreds of thousands of civilians.' The scientist, he argued, had a role in protecting science from becoming an instrument of mega-death by making explicit the linkages between science and morality. The world of science needs voices from within the community of science who could restore the internal autonomy and rigour of science. Reddy gave voice to this dilemma which is as valid then as it is today:

> ...the giants of Indian science, in particular C. V. Raman and Meghnad Saha, considered their independence from government in the years immediately after 1947 to be a matter of pride. But, power was irresistible to the scientists who followed. And the only way this desire could be fulfilled was to woo government through its scientific ministries and their secretaries. Scientific academies courted secretaries of scientific ministries to be their presidents and office-bearers. There was no guilt or regret that, in the process, the academies lost their independence. Or, that their voices could not be distinguished from those of government. This lacuna is in a country where there are very few other institutions that are independent enough to come up with perspectives different from the government.

Reddy, in a different social context, was voicing a discomfiture

that, I was surprised to learn, bothered C.V. Raman more than half a century ago. A discomfiture arising from the recognition that something had changed fundamentally in the relation between science and democracy, between the two World Wars. Delivering the convocation address at IIT Madras in 1966, he pointed out three causes responsible for the spectacular rise of science from the beginning of the twentieth century. Elaborating on the first two he went on to point out: 'But there is a third and a most sinister way in which science has developed in the last sixty years. And that is science in its application to war... It is nothing but militarism, very thinly disguised. That is what is happening today. It is very sad. Our science is going that way...There are sensitive consciences even in those countries who revolt from this sort of thing...this prostitution of science. Where will it end?' Clearly Raman was objecting to the drift of science into the clasp of militarism that was as much a reflection of a development that occurred between the Wars and progressed further into something more fatal during the Cold War. And so he exhorted the graduating students to question all the wisdom they received for 'no one is infallible', not even his heroes Hermann von Helmholtz and Albert Einstein; for: 'New knowledge may upset what may have been made in the past, and may completely throw out what has been done before.' What was required then according to him was a fearless independence of thinking, the absence of which he would argue stood in the path of progress.

In short, what we are confronted with is the world of Big Science that requires large and gigantic doses of funding. This can only be acquired by scientists lobbying in the corridors of state power or large corporations. And as has been noticed, advocacy and lobbying splinters the collegiality and solidarity

binding the scientific community dedicated to a greater good, producing instead a plurality of super specialists distributed in constellations of competing projects. Consequently, the flight of science from public to private knowledge, it could be argued, is catalysed by the incentivization of the pursuit of knowledge (hitherto a common good) that is now rewarded differently, this time as intellectual property. This shift from collegial solidarity to mandated competition requires an internal adaptation within the world of science, to what Mansfield calls '...the chanciness of democracy...[where] science can no longer represent a virtuous model of a democratic community', as its enlightened spokespersons and philosophers had earlier envisaged.

To sum up then, we started with the standard tale where modern science and the democratic process co-evolved over the last few centuries. In the twenty-first century there has been a growing parting of ways. This is not to say that scientific practice, however imperfect, has abandoned its self-regulating norms that could be characterized as democratic. On the contrary, the changing social contract of science and the institutional and organizational expansion of science have rendered it vulnerable to external steering and partially muted its critical voice. But this voice itself is essential to scientific activity, a core feature of the making of robust knowledge, as well as the prospect of building a democratic citizenship. Does science have the internal resources, as it did in the past, to reignite that critical voice?

LIVING BETWEEN THOUGHT AND ACTION

PETER RONALD DESOUZA

Romila Thapar defines the public intellectual as one who 'should take a position independent of those in power, enabling him or her to question debatable ideas, irrespective of who propagates them. The public intellectual has to see himself or herself as a person who is as close to being autonomous as is possible... And...has at the same time a concern for what constitutes the rights of the citizens...particularly on issues of social justice.'

There are two distinct ideas in this definition: that of the 'autonomous thinker' and that of the 'advocate of social justice'. While Thapar seems to imply that these two personas can be easily aligned and that in combination they constitute the social and intellectual power of the public intellectual, I believe, in contrast, that such an alignment is not as smooth and unproblematic as has been suggested and that there is, in fact, a creative tension between the two. Each follows a different logic. The spirit of the 'autonomous intellectual' is driven by an epistemic logic which seeks to examine the validity of claims made by a person by using protocols of assessment that are set, agreed upon and independent of the person, whereas the 'champion of social justice' is driven by an ethical logic that seeks to examine the structures of society to determine the

extent to which they satisfy the principle of a fair and just distribution of societal resources.

This is an important distinction since it acknowledges that each follows a different protocol as they assess societal power and distributive processes. While they may both begin at the same starting point, that is looking for firm evidence to support or criticize policies and institutions, at a later point their paths begin to diverge. While the one chooses to remain agnostic about the search findings because of a commitment to the tentativeness of propositions, the other is prepared to initiate search closure and transit to a phase of action, since the findings, up to the point of divergence, meet the criteria of being satisficing, that is, it is sufficient to establish the situation of injustice. As a result, a time could come when the two may even be in opposition to each other. I do not want to present the issue as if there is a polarity between the two personae as I believe that in every public intellectual resides both the autonomous intellectual as well as the advocate for social justice—a restless cohabitation that gives the intellectual in India a schizophrenic existence.

I have made the distinction here, which to me is mainly analytical and not existential, because I want to bring into our discussion the different logics at work in the public intellectual. This means that when the public intellectual intervenes in the public sphere he or she has to allow one persona to be dominant over the other. This point at which one persona yields to the other, the 'tipping point', needs to be understood. In a society and polity such as India, where the structures of power of the old order are being challenged by the drivers of democracy, structures which do not easily and seamlessly yield to the egalitarian vision offered by democracy produce

forms of power (perhaps intermediate forms) that are quite tyrannical in expression and arbitrary in execution, the public intellectual has to be a social critic. This entails being both an expositor of falsehood (and there is a considerable amount in the public discourse created by those who dominate the instruments of perception) and an advocate of social justice. The public intellectual has to carry both the persona of the autonomous intellectual and the advocate of social causes equally within himself or herself, sometimes allowing the one to dominate, sometimes the other.

It is the tipping point that will determine when one yields to the other, when one recognizes in the political context the need for a particular persona to be in the foreground. Challenging falsehood, interestingly, is also often social advocacy because the unjust system is so full of falsehood. Because the exercise of power in India is increasingly becoming an end in itself, recourse to falsehood is the default mode of public life. We see it every day in the media, particularly in the electronic media where dissimulation is resorted to by glib party spokespersons. Falsehood is the order of government.

The public intellectual must therefore continuously strive to show that another world is possible in India. In a strange way this is not just a responsibility to the citizens of India but also a responsibility to the people of the world. If India can show that another, more humane, world is possible, in contrast to the current direction in which it is going, then the world will have an alternative against the arrogance of global capital. The relationship between 'the Truth' and 'the Just' is, therefore, not as unproblematic as has been suggested. It is in the tension between the two, which is so palpable in a society undergoing layered social transformation such as India, that the public

intellectual has to struggle to know when to speak, condemn, approve and take a stand in the face of the world and when to let things pass. Many years ago an obituary in honour of Professor Ernest Gellner described him as an 'intellectual who knew which battles to fight and which to let go'. A public intellectual in India must know which battles to fight.

There are three parts to this essay. The first part will briefly look at three public intellectuals whom I had, serendipitously, read about and whose actions demonstrate the way each of the individuals resolved the tension between the two personae of the autonomous intellectual and the advocate of social justice. It is heartening to know in these uncertain times, when the propaganda of the powerful is so successful in manipulating our perceptions, that such people exist and are prepared to combat the lies of the powerful. In these dark times we need such people to remind us of the moral-political issues that are involved in public life. The second part will examine the factors that prevent intellectuals from having more of the 'public' in their intellectual life in India today, and the reasons they remain just intellectuals rather than becoming public intellectuals. The third part will look at how these factors work in Indian politics today.

I

The first case is of Priya Pillai, the Greenpeace activist who in spite of a valid visa and a ticket was not allowed to travel to the UK to present her case on the violations of the human rights of the Adivasi population by the policies of the Indian state. The Adivasis live mainly in areas rich in mineral resources. As a result they get displaced in large numbers from their traditional habitats and livelihood locations. The new

mineral and land policies of the Government of India (GoI) will displace them further. The GoI saw Pillai's testimony in the UK as an anti-Indian act and, in a shameful decision by any authority in any constitutional democracy, issued a 'look out' circular which enabled the immigration authorities at the airport to debar her from boarding the plane. The justification given as per the public statements of the Home Ministry and government spokespersons was that her actions would lead to possible sanctions against India and hence were anti-national. The government's affidavit in the Delhi High Court claimed that curtailing her speech was essential for national security. India's fair name would be tarnished and it would make India vulnerable to sanctions as in the case of countries like North Korea, Iran and Russia. National security was invoked to curtail free speech on human rights. This is the standard procedure followed by all tyrannical governments. In response to such arrogance of power, Pillai submitted to the court the following statement. 'If I accept that the government has a right to dictate what I can and can't say, then India and all Indians would lose something priceless—our absolute right to free speech. I cannot and will not accept that.' She saw the government as acting against the people of India. She said so on television, in the newspapers, on social media, and in court. This is a fine example of speaking truth to power, combining in her public position the autonomous intellectual with the advocate for social justice. Her arguments of how national interest is determined and by whom, and on whose behalf the state speaks—the mining companies or the Adivasis—the arbitrary actions of the state in detaining her, are all arguments of the highest moral order. The state has responded to such criticism by banning the receipt of foreign funds by Greenpeace on the

grounds that they have violated FCRA regulations. This has placed the continuance of the organization in jeopardy. The voice that spoke on behalf of the Adivasis is being silenced by the arrogance of power. The partisanship of the government is obvious: while Greenpeace cannot receive foreign funds, the activist religious organization aligned with the RSS, the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP) can.

The second case is of an Israeli professor, Yeshayahu Leibowitz, who, for most of his life, fought against Israeli policies towards the Palestinians. He called the president of the High Court a 'monster' when the latter justified the use of torture against Palestinians if it was done in the interests of national security. He criticized Israeli society and its education system, which produced what he called 'Judeo Nazis', as a failure. Professor Yeshayahu Leibowitz was an Israeli public intellectual from the Hebrew University of Jerusalem known for his outspoken opinions on Judaism, ethics, religion and politics. He died on 18 August 1994 at the age of ninety-three in Jerusalem. Here are answers that he gave to four questions in a long interview given in 1990.

> *You always go back to World War II and you use words like 'Judeo-Nazis'. Why?*
>
> The minister of Defence [Yitzhak Rabin] who gave the order to break the arms and legs of Palestinian prisoners is a Nazi. And the president of the High Court [Moshe Landau] who judged that torturing prisoners was allowed is a Nazi.
>
> *But how could those 'Judeo-Nazis' be raised here, in Israel?*
>
> Because they have no other value than patriotism. No other value. No other value for the people of the State

of Israel than their nationality!

So are all of these days dedicated to 'memory' pure fabrications? Part of a process that, starting from humanity, passes by nationality and ends up in barbarism.

Ends up in bestiality! Don't avoid using the same term! He talked specifically about 'bestiality'. Yes, bestiality is when a man receives the order to break the arms and legs of another man and obeys it! Without hesitation!

But how is it possible that students who learned about the Holocaust for twelve years are capable of acting like Nazis?

Ask them!

To take this stand not just against the Israeli state but against Israeli society itself, which he believed had lost its moral compass, was very courageous and very lonely, particularly since, in the heightened atmosphere of nationalism that prevailed in Israel, he would certainly have been targeted both by the state and society. But right till the end he stood his ground of exposing the lie behind state propaganda, of condemning the gross injustice of the state's actions against the Palestinians and, worse, of Israeli society's complicity in the perpetuation of such injustice. He believed—as do most of us who grieve for the innocents who died in the gas chambers—that history had placed a great moral responsibility—of promoting the principles of humanism and decency—on the Israeli people. For him to coin the terms 'Judeo-Nazi' and 'monster' to describe the president of the High Court, to use these taboo words publicly in Israel which had been born because of the horrors of the Holocaust perpetrated by the Nazis, shows the struggle that he must have waged in the quiet chambers of his soul. A deep moral disquiet compelled him to use these taboo words.

We need to be attentive to that moral disquiet within us, to what Gandhi called the 'inner voice'. The public intellectual must listen to his or her inner voice.

The third case was reported in the papers on 28 February 2015. Avijit Roy, a blogger of Bangladeshi origin was visiting his country from the US for a few days (against the advice of his father because of threats against him). He was hacked to death by suspected religious extremists for his blogs arguing for free thought and a secular Bangladesh. As an atheist he questioned religious beliefs, particularly in his famous book *Bishwasher Virus* (Virus of Faith) and his blogs such as 'Does the Quran Have any Scientific Miracles?' As Avijit and his wife were returning from a book fair, that very precious iconic event of Bangladesh, they were attacked by machete-wielding men. It was a fundamentalist mindset he was fighting against and he lost his life in defence of his beliefs. His wife was also injured. Rationality and free thought were macheted that day. A few days prior to his death, Comrade Govind Pansare, who was also an advocate of critical thought, was shot on similar grounds of intolerance in Kolhapur. The public intellectual must fear not just the power of a tyrannical state but also the power of an intolerant society and still speak truth to power. Sometimes one's life is at stake. Democracy requires that this 'sometimes' does not become 'very often' but 'very rare'. Sadly, the trend is moving in the opposite direction because so many who could speak choose to remain silent.

II

If the three individuals referred to above could stand their ground in the face of hostility from both state and society what is it that prevents more of us from imitating them? I

believe there are four sources of censorship in our world today that we must sociologically examine for their impact on the public sphere: (i) public authority, (ii) social groups, (iii) one's peer community, and (iv) the self. These instil fear and stifle expression and it is important for our understanding of the public intellectual to understand the roots of that fear. Fear is one of the themes that Thapar talks about:

> ...academics today are hesitant to defend even the right to make what might be broadly called alternative, if not rational interpretations, however sensitively they may be expressed. This is evident from the ease with which books are banned and pulped, or demands made that they be burned, and syllabuses changed under religious and political pressure, or the intervention of the state. Why do such actions provoke so little reaction among many academics and professionals? The obvious answer, usually given, is that they fear the instigators who are persons with the backing of political authority. Is this the only answer?

Let me, in what follows, respond in some detail to this very important question.

Let me begin with the fear of public authority. When confronted by public authority many intellectuals in India today adopt a policy of self-censorship that prevents them from expressing an opinion because of some imagined fear of consequences. It is not just the fear that comes from a recognition of the enormous power of the state to tyrannize that prevents intellectuals from speaking out against falsehood and injustice. This is a recognition that has been at the core of legal and political thinking that has, for several centuries, tried to limit

and contain such tyranny. The Priya Pillai case shows that the state does have the power to coerce, punish and harass people using the fig leaf of legality. The fear of harassment is enough to counsel prudence. But such a calculus of prudence extends to other public authorities as well and this is disappointing. *We live in a general culture in India where we fear all public authority.* Dissent is seen as resulting in harmful consequences for oneself and for one's near and dear ones. What these consequences are, or could be, is often only fuzzily perceived. There exists a subterranean fear of all public authority. The default position in India today, especially in the face of the majoritarian politics of the RSS parivar, is that it is better to be prudent. Silence is preferred to speaking out against public authority. It is not only the state authorities that are generally feared, but all public authority. Alarmingly, such prudence can be seen in all places committed to the production and dissemination of ideas such as universities, newspapers, research institutions, courts, etc.

What is the phenomenology of such fear? Why is it so widespread? How has it emerged? What is the threshold above which speech gets self-censored? Is there a weak public culture of dissent? These and other similar questions need to be examined. Whatever be the reasons for such a public culture of fear among intellectuals it is strong enough to cause many to diminish their commitment to their own ideas, to discount the truth value of their own perspectives on an issue, and thus to be silent or at least postpone their articulation of a viewpoint till a 'safer' time emerges. The reality shows that this 'safer time' will never come. But the self-deception will continue. Only this self-deception will allow these silent scholars to retain some sense of self-respect. We see it in the big universities and in the small regional ones, on little issues

and on the significant ones. It is so pervasive.

The removal of certain texts from the syllabus (such as A. K. Ramanujan's essay 'Three Hundred Ramayanas' in Delhi University, and Rohinton Mistry's *Such a Long Journey* in Mumbai University) which were put there by academic committees is an example of such fear. In the face of protests and threats from fundamentalist groups academic decisions were overturned. When fundamentalist groups exercise a veto on what should be studied, a veto that is growing under the patronage of political groups, then we know that we live in perilous times. It is this fear which spreads and become the background text of our intellectual life. In *Listen, Little Man* Wilhelm Reich describes the consequences of such fear. We live in a climate where we desire 'adventure but seek security'.

The second source of censorship is the one perpetrated by social groups. In India's plural democracy we see minorities exercising their veto over opinion that they dislike. Whereas Alexis de Tocqueville, in *Democracy in America*, feared the censorship of the majority over minority opinion, we in India have to fear the censorship of the minority who threaten violence if an expression that they dislike is not banned or withdrawn by the state. I would like to give an example from the hundreds that can be cited where such censorship has occurred. This is from the Indian Art Summit of 2011. When faced with threats by right-wing religious groups, the organizers withdrew from display the works of M. F. Husain even though in the publicity preceding the event they had announced that his works would be on exhibition. The organizers buckled under threats from right-wing religious groups. Rather than seek the state's security services to keep safe Husain's art and other exhibits, they succumbed to the fear of violence. It was a

shameful act of cowardice. Whatever may be the rationalizations given for this act of cowardice, it gave the heckler a sense of power, and humiliated an eminent artist such as M. F. Husain, who had achieved every honour that the Indian state could bestow on him, including the Padma Vibhushan.

Did nobody tell the organizers about Namdeo Dhasal? If one reads the poetry of Namdeo Dhasal one would get a sense of his challenging the dominant caste order, his fearlessness in mocking the sacred texts of all groups. Speaking against the sacred texts did not worry him because he saw in them the seeds of the tyranny that oppressed his people and that he was railing against. In his poem 'Cruelty' in the collection *Khel* (1983) he described himself as 'the venereal sore in the private part of language'.

The third source of censorship is one's peer group. This can be both direct and indirect. When the intellectual has to strike a balance every day between being affable to one's colleagues by tempering one's criticism of their ideas and thereby compromising the truth, and speaking the unvarnished truth as he or she sees it at the risk of causing offence to one's colleagues, the chances are that the demand of affability will (mostly) win over the demand of honesty. It is much harder to speak truth to friendship and fraternity because that requires an institutional culture of separating the personal and the professional. There is both personal and social psychology involved here. This difficulty is not because of the plurality of epistemic frames that one encounters in a knowledge community, although that is a factor, but because one's relationship with one's colleagues or peer group is located in that liminal space, between intimacy and alienness, and hence the culture of deep trust, so essential for truth speaking, remains undeveloped.

This may seem such a trivial aspect of the intellectual's public life—perhaps not worth mentioning—that it is a part of what can be called the human estate, the domain of literature and not of the policy sciences. But I have referred to it here since it occupies such a large part of the intellectual's life that it has become a habit. It sets the psychological threshold for truth speaking and this then has a bearing on the attitude one adopts on the large public issues. As a consequence of such holding back the tyranny of being comfortable with stability and routine enters the niches of the 'everyday' professional sphere, even at the cost of cohabiting with falsehood. It soon grows and spreads to other sectors of society because silence has now become preferable to critical speech, because silence now gives many social dividends. Acquiescence becomes a habit. Why do so few of us speak out against the growing power of the fundamentalists, especially of the major religious groups in society? Because it requires us to depart from our daily routine, from the comfort zone that such routine brings, to step out of ourselves and break free from habit and move willingly and deliberatively into the more vulnerable zone of possible retaliation. This is the zone of anxiety. It is not easy to step out. It requires courage and consciousness of consequences and willingness to face these consequences. Most of us therefore avoid the uncertainty that comes with being in this vulnerable zone.

The fourth is censorship by the self. While the previous three sources of censorship are external to the individual, where he or she remained silent because of the fear caused by some external entity, this fourth is based on the calculus of self-interest. The intellectual here anticipates the interest of some external agency that can further his or her ambitions.

The intellectual does not, therefore, wish to antagonize these potential patrons who may be universities (note the harassment of scholars who have spoken out in US universities, the recent 2014 case of Professor Steven Salaita at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign being the most prominent), eminent scholars, professional departments, powerful social groups, or donor agencies. (Bertrand Russell was prevented from teaching at the College of the City of New York because of his views.) This produces a politics of co-option. Its most manifest form is the co-opted intellectual who aligns his or her views with those of potential benefactors. Why do I discuss this pursuit of self-interest by the intellectual when we are only talking within the limited context of the public intellectual? My discussion may be relevant to the sociology of intellectuals but how is it relevant to a discussion of the public intellectual in India? I have discussed it here because I see the forces of co-option growing in India, especially under globalization where the inducements on offer are just too attractive. Too much is at stake to speak the truth. The inducements alter the way in which the intellectual sees the world. In an earlier time the word 'comprador' was used to describe such intellectuals. It is a word that has not lost its relevance.

So, when an opinion is voiced that there is in fact no decline in the public intellectual but just a decline (in clout as well as numbers) of public intellectuals as a whole, and that they have been replaced by the right-wing intellectuals, the point that is being missed is the processes of co-option that are being instigated by the forces of global capital. The autonomy of such right-wing intellectuals is suspect. I do not here imply mala fide intent but instead wish to suggest the colonization of their minds (in the sense of K. C. Bhattacharyas's *Swaraj in*

Ideas) by the interests of global capital. This will become clearer in the following paragraphs. To understand the colonization and the struggle against it, it would be interesting to map the intellectual journey of Joseph Stiglitz who migrated from being the chief economist of the World Bank to becoming a leading critic of global capital. What does Stiglitz see that these right-wing intellectuals do not?

Further I would like to state a fundamental principle—that a public intellectual in India today cannot speak on *behalf* of the existing order. There is too much dishonesty, falsehood and injustice which is part of the existing order and so a public intellectual has to find those issues on which to critique the existing order. However good an order may be there is always scope for making it more just and more decent. The rise of inequality makes the case for decency urgent. We need to generate a public debate that goes beyond growth parameters and talk about a decent society and its requirements, about an ethic of responsibility and of a collective and interdependent life based on dignity for all. The last bit—'for all'—is difficult for the ideological system of global capital to promise since by its rhetoric the losers are themselves to blame for their condition. Global capital needs an underclass that is acquiescent. The public intellectual has to be a critic of the global order and its local supporters who control the airwaves.

III

How do these four sources of censorship diffract in India today? I think there are two large landscapes that we must consider, the first of which defines the process of knowledge production under the dynamics of global capital and the second which is defined by the contemporary politics of India under

the threat of Hindu Rashtra.

When we consider the knowledge landscape we discover that in spite of the Internet and sites such as Wikipedia, and in spite of an explosion of blogs and postings, knowledge production is still dominated by powerful knowledge producing institutions. There is no free market in ideas. There are strong knowledge hegemons located in the West, and one could argue that they constitute cartels in what is seemingly a flat earth since they determine and produce the fashionable theories by which we look at structures of power: at the fair distribution of societal resources, at the nature of desirable social relations, and at the key drivers of change. These knowledge cartels have made the old ideal of the university—as an autonomous knowledge producing institution, and the ideal of knowledge, education and learning as a common good—outdated and irrelevant. Universities are now supposed to be market friendly. Society has no responsibility for them. Students are consumers of knowledge. Knowledge production has to have specific sponsors, else it cannot proceed. Asked to re-invent itself, to be relevant to a globalized economy because of funding patterns, the university is beginning to look like a multinational corporation. The idea of education as a public good has migrated, in this discourse, to knowledge as a private good. The attempt by some internet companies to privatize the internet is an example of this shift.

In the globalizing world, new institutions have come to be the key knowledge producers for state policy making and for state action. Instruments such as public-private partnership have become the new mantra of policy making in every sector, even health and education. These keywords have been sold by the Bretton Woods Institutions, who, along with investment

banks, the major global consultancies, the rating agencies, and lately the World Economic Forum, have begun to determine the framework by which we look at resources policy and also social policy. They have come to construct the vocabulary of our social policy. They drive the public debate on how states should manage and regulate their societal resources. Because they wield such power, both political and financial, traditional universities have had to refashion themselves and abandon their earlier aspiration of being 'as autonomous as possible', and become the allies of these new knowledge producers who recruit their students, fund their endowed chairs, sponsor their research, and leverage their networks. Wall Street is the world's intellectual. In winter Wall Street goes on skiing holidays to Davos.

The knowledge landscape is thus very skewed. In the face of these powerful entities whose knowledge production is driven primarily by the material interests of their clients and not by truth commitments, and who dominate the knowledge high ground, advocacy groups have to struggle to have their perspective heard. They do not have the resources or the personnel to produce the 'sophisticated' knowledge products that the new producers put out. As a result they are compelled to occupy the knowledge low ground. In such an unequal contest for the 'truth of the matter' the public intellectual has to make a choice. While his or her 'autonomous intellectual' persona requires him or her to subject all claims to critical scrutiny, the 'advocate for social justice' persona compels him to extend unqualified support to the advocacy groups because they represent the side of social justice which is essentially a distributive idea. He or she cannot therefore be equidistant between all claims. In India the structures of power and the

direction of change is moving away from the aspiration of our early years—of a decent society based on social inclusion and dignity.

The second landscape in which the public intellectual in India has to function is that created by the forces of Hindutva. Challenges to expression, whether these be books of fiction, scholarly studies, paintings, songs, cartoons, and even films, have been widespread and growing. Self-censorship has become the default mode as scholars and publishing houses anticipate such threats. It has got worse with the triumphalist posturing of the triumvirate: the head of the government, of the party and of the RSS. The climate of fear has deepened. I had no sense of the extent of this fear till, in early February 2015, during a visit to an NGO in Rajasthan, one of its members casually remarked to me that the AAP victory was good because it lifted the climate of fear from the polity. My first thought was: Isn't this an exaggeration, since the AAP victory was in only one small state, Delhi, so why did someone in Rajasthan feel liberated? But on second thought, I understood.

In the national and global situation today, described in some detail above, I see six vantage points from which the public intellectual must speak. Let me give each one of these a name, associating them with individuals who have spoken truth to power. The first is the Dhasal-Ananthamurthy vantage point, which is defined in terms of the cultural critique that it offers of contemporary Indian reality. I have named it the Dhasal-Ananthamurthy point because it carries two locations that are crucial, each associated with one of the names. From Dhasal came a searing critique of the caste order, which in spite of the efforts of some sociologists to offer evidence of its fading away, continues in new pathological forms as evidenced

by khap panchayats and honour killings, violent opposition to inter-caste marriages, atrocities against Dalits reported every day in the papers and so on. Dhasal thought that all the wisdom of all the religious texts was fit to be flushed down the toilet. His was a voice of anger and pain at the politics of denial and subterfuge of the existing social order. U. R. Ananthamurthy spoke about the unity in the diversity of India, and argued that pushing too hard in one direction produces a counter-movement, giving strength to the other. Dhasal saw the emancipatory future in western modernity. Ananthamurthy saw it in the power of the bhasas. There are many nuanced positions in between these two which provide a cultural critique of contemporary reality.

The second vantage point is a critique of the developmental and ecological policy regime. Let me call it the Patkar-Gadgil location, where the issues of displacement, rehabilitation, livelihood security, inclusiveness, consultative processes, ecological stress, intergenerational equity and environmental sustainability are voiced. This location covers a large range of issues. Many civil society organizations (CSOs) work within this location. While there are differences and perhaps even incompatible positions between the various organizations, what makes them eligible to be grouped together here is their critique of the policy regime that ignores the rights and interests of the marginal and subaltern groups whose livelihood concerns are trampled to promote the interests of big capital. As a result the ecological value of biodiversity and the services provided by this diversity is given little weightage while, in contrast, energy factories are not just encouraged but given subsidies. Government has become hostile to this vantage point, arguing that there is a 2 per cent loss of GDP because of the

critique that comes from here; it has responded by placing obstacles in the way of CSOs by undermining their sources of funds such that they become financially unviable. Greenpeace is the most recent victim of such government hostility.

The third vantage point is in the academy. Here the critique is about the arguments that government makes with respect to the contradictions that are pointed out, or to the thin evidence that is provided by the government in its defence, or the lapses and inattentiveness in these arguments to local conditions, or to the alienness of the cultural frames from which it is made. Let me call this the Nandy-Sheth-Thapar-Drèze location. I do not mean to suggest an identity of views here between the four names identified with this vantage point but if one tries to map the contours of this position one would notice that it can house both the secular and the anti-secular, the rationalist and the humanist positions, the expansion of economic opportunity and the concerns of distributive justice. And yet it can be a critique of the government in power. The academy occupies this third vantage point, just as the CSOs occupied the second vantage point. Since the academy is committed to knowledge protocols in its task of challenging falsehood, internal differences between the different positions within this third location are irrelevant since all are bound by protocols of argument and hence open to rigorous examination.

The fourth vantage point looks critically at science, technology and society, the STS location that is increasingly being visited for clarity on the wide-ranging impacts of science and technology on societal processes. New concepts, new frames of understanding are called for as are new constraints on scientific research such as the discussions on Ethical, Legal and Social Impacts (ELSI) that have produced a range of alerts on

the implications of human genome research. Scientific advances have been taking place at a scorching pace, from biology to informatics, and these have and will have impacts that range from privacy issues to concerns about creating new biological products in the laboratory. Ethicists and social theorists are finding it hard to even frame the relevant questions that need to be addressed. The Indian state is in an even worse condition, being far behind the advances of science and technology, as a result, it has little policy capacities or imagination to deal with this new world that is upon us. This location, which can be called the Aruna Shanbaug-Bill Gates location, is today sparsely populated by public intellectuals in India.

The fifth vantage point is important for an India that seeks to move from a world of superstition to a world of reason and of critical temper. I would associate this vantage point with Kovoor-Dabholkar-Pansare who challenged the many superstitions that have held our people back. Manipulators have used the innocence of people to control, exploit and dominate them, promoting superstitions when they display the beginnings of a critical disposition. The critical vantage point offered by Dabholkar and Pansare who campaigned for it in the face of many odds, tragically led to their assassination because religion, in both its immanent and transcendental forms, has held back the egalitarian and democratic challenge to the existing order. Interestingly this fifth vantage point has had to combat not just the powerful forces of many established godmen who have political backing from the Sangh Parivar, and who thrive on building webs of superstition, but also the modern technologies of mass communication that give these forces a long reach. This fifth vantage point is also thinly populated.

There is a sixth vantage point that I would like to call the

miscellaneous point, more to affirm the innovativeness of the human mind which refuses to be consigned to fixed categories. It is here that ridicule, satire, adventure, rebellion and risk-taking are located. India has an abundance of persons located here, most of them young, most of them unwilling to be guided by yesterday's certainties. Their numbers are growing and India it seems is on the cusp of an explosion of such adventurous acts. This can be called the Bansal (of Flipkart fame)-Anita Narre (of refusing-to-return-to-her-marital-home-because-there-was-no-toilet fame)-Shah Bano (of challenging-the-patriarchy-within-communities fame) location. Are they public intellectuals? If we see them as ones who challenged the old order with their deeds, which in turn were preceded by a conception of what needed to be done, then they are indeed public intellectuals. Organic public intellectuals perhaps.

FRAMING A QUESTION: QUESTIONING A FRAME

NEELADRI BHATTACHARYA

The central point that Romila Thapar makes is very important: intellectuals must speak up, question authority, think of transformative changes, raise their voice against injustice and critique orthodoxies. The possibilities of a good society are premised on such questionings. Only such critiques, Thapar suggests, can destabilize hierarchies, disturb the sway of orthodoxies, and challenge the arrogance of authoritarian power. Beyond an argument about possible consequences, Thapar makes an ethical and moral plea—surrounded by injustice and authoritarian forces, intellectuals have a moral duty to perform: to speak up and be counted.

I entirely agree with the overall thrust of this central argument. We need a critical public to sustain a democratic society in which justice, equality and tolerance become constitutive values, moral goods. And the critical voice of public intellectuals is crucial to the making of such societies. If that critical voice is absent, or is silenced, we have reasons to fear. I do, however, want to raise some questions about the details of the argument and the way the argument unfolds. To do this is to affirm Thapar's demand that we be always critical.

In the essay, she talks about our present that appears dismal: intellectuals do not appear to speak, intervene in public events or question what needs to be questioned. We return to the past in search of times when intellectuals defied authority, spoke up, and were often ready to die to defend what they believed in. Such a narrative can end up being a celebratory history. When we return to the past to draw inspiration for the present we often tend to celebrate the figures and events we return to. All too often we understate the inner contractions of the events we focus on, and overlook their darker and problematic implications. We erase the ambiguities and inner tensions that were constitutive of the historical figures we choose to celebrate. We do not see the many conflicting things that historical individuals say and do. We tend to focus on what we wish to celebrate. Our search for inspiration defines the way we represent the past.

I am not arguing that we cannot return to the past to critique the present. I am only suggesting that celebratory returns tend to be problematic. They are often structured by nostalgia. A critical return demands—to push Thapar's call for critique—that we acclaim but also critique, we affirm but also question.

Let me take one example from the lecture. The Enlightenment, Thapar suggests, celebrated critical thought, which became a basis of the questioning of orthodoxies, hierarchies, and taken for granted assumptions. The Enlightenment appears in this reading as a liberating force. It was a force that made societal transformations possible and created a space for justice. By foregrounding the power of reason, it established the grounds on which a radical critique of society could be elaborated.

This is a celebratory view of the Enlightenment. The Enlightenment certainly created the conceptual premises for a new idea of the individual and foregrounded notions of autonomy, freedom and reason. But can we today affirm only a positive view of the Enlightenment? What about the relationship between the Enlightenment and the new orthodoxies that evolved, its sanction of new forms of power, new structures of authority, new intolerances? If the rhetoric of reason was the basis of the critique of old orthodoxies, it was equally the grounds on which new orthodoxies developed. If the language of reason opened up spaces of dialogue, it has equally closed off such spaces, refusing to acknowledge the possibilities of alternative reason. The authority of absolute truths is most often asserted by referring to the power of universal reason. Other ways of thinking and incommensurable paradigms are seen as irrational and unacceptable, not to be engaged in productive dialogue. Enlightenment reason invented a regime of derogatory categories through which the world was observed, stereotyped and classified. Many repressive regimes have operated under the sign of reason: colonial expansion was driven by the rhetoric of reason and rationality, Stalinist orthodoxies operated under the slogan of 'science and reason', and international wars are still fought to exterminate what reason sees as barbarism.

In celebrating the resources of the Enlightenment we cannot overlook its entanglement with repressive power. We have to ask: which Enlightenment are we speaking of? Which reason do we celebrate? Does that reason have space for radical difference, incommensurable frames of thought, and a serious and empathetic dialogue with the other? Once we ask such questions, we cannot so easily dismiss the critiques of the Enlightenment and Transcendental reason. We do not have to

affirm all that the critics say. But we have to take those questions seriously. We must recognize equally that social critiques may draw upon the intellectual resources of anti-Enlightenment thought. Gandhi, after all, provided one of the most searching critiques of universal reason, modern society and colonialism.

The Enlightenment notion of reason and truth, I suggest, also goes against the idea of Socratic thinking that Thapar talks about.

Socrates valued not the possession of correct doctrines or the truth, but the method through which one searched for the truth. For him the process of dialogue and questioning was important. His life was a performance of this ideal, expressed in his persistent engagement with dialogues, ceaseless examination of accepted wisdom, and tireless commitment to questioning. For him, the truth was not something fixed, something to be asserted, possessed, and held on to; it was a process, a method, it was to be revealed through a performance, a philosophical engagement. The point of arrival was only partly important, for what was arrived at was to be questioned and negated once again. To celebrate the point of arrival—the truth—was to undermine ceaseless questioning as a positive value.

In this sense, negation was productive. It was more important than affirmation. Negation had a world disclosive character: it uncovered, disclosed. It was a positive virtue. The highest human good was to examine and question the idea of virtue every day, refute and negate unacceptable notions of virtue. The most productive thinking, the purest thinking, was this persistent refutation and negation, this ceaseless questioning. What was celebrated in this attitude, then, was the productive mutability of thought rather than the fixating of truth: an attitude of mind that is forever open to the idea of being

questioned, to the principle that all belief has to be examined and negated. No truth was sacrosanct.

Socrates had to die not because he believed in a truth that he refused to give up. He possibly died because he refused to give up his right to question, examine and negate, not just authority but everything. He was committed to the idea of dialogue as the ultimate virtue, a process through which the truth was to be discovered, negated, to be rediscovered and negated once again. What he believed in was a dialectic in which one logic was to confront another within a discursive inter-subjective engagement, ceaselessly, without end. Socrates refused to give up the right to negate. In a sense this notion of dialogue and truth is radically different from notions that celebrate transcendental reason and universal truths. I will return to the idea of dialogue later.

In elaborating her argument, Thapar refers to many public intellectuals in history. I am not certain the category 'public intellectual' can include all these figures, nor can the idea of intellectual autonomy be projected back to pre-modern times. The notion of the public intellectual for me is inseparably connected to the notion of a modern public sphere; and the idea of individual autonomy is intimately associated with the modernist notion of individual self. In any case, these individuals being referred to are not all of the same type. I think we need to separate the different types of intellectuals to see what they can tell us.

First, some of the intellectuals Thapar talks of are heroic individuals, like Socrates. In her presentation, Socrates stands by his beliefs, refuses to give up his ideas, and is ready to die for his convictions. Socrates, without doubt, remains one of the most iconic heroic figures in history. He has been widely

celebrated as the ultimate symbol of moral and intellectual integrity. His life has been romanticized and mythicized.

The second category Thapar refers to are visionaries, the Buddha being one example amongst many. They questioned the doxa, critiqued social hierarchies, and offered alternative ways of being in the world, ordering society, and thinking about good and possible life. They fought orthodoxies (the Brahmanas) and constituted heterodoxies (the Shramanas). They spoke about justice and suffering and ways of changing society.

In the third category are the reformers who struggled for smaller reforms, fighting dominant beliefs and cultural attitudes. They may not have offered—like the Buddha—a holistic view of an alternate way of being and life, but were important in bringing about changes in society.

Then there were the philosophers and thinkers—those who elaborated modes of critical thinking. We turn to Socrates again—and his method of argumentation—the Socratic method—of engaging in a dialogue, questioning all arguments, demonstrating their inner contradictions and the fallacies of the initial assumptions, in a never-ending search of truth. There were also the Enlightenment philosophers—Locke, Hume, Voltaire, Montesquieu, Diderot, Rousseau and others—with their rhetoric of scientific reason.

Finally, we have intellectuals as professionals, not as scholars. Here Thapar is referring to anyone who had a recognized professional stature, and who sought explanation of public action from those in authority, critiquing what was happening in society.

My question is the following: when we are talking about the public intellectual today which type of intellectual are we talking of? We can return to great figures for inspiration.

mythify their acts, romanticize their heroism, but we cannot expect everyone to live heroic lives, or become visionaries like the Buddha, or emulate the examples of other great thinkers and philosophers.

It is the smaller acts of persistent questioning that can be the basis of a critical public culture so important for the small changes that matter—small changes that at times develop into big changes. The Socratic method of persistent questioning, a refusal to accept existing orthodoxies and taken for granted assumptions is something that can be celebrated as a general mode of being without necessarily emulating his mythic heroism. We can do this without a necessary recourse to Reason with a capital R, without affirming the authority of transcendental reason that is arrogant of its power to judge and dominate.

Part of the moral charge of Thapar's argument derives from a reference to heroic individuals and great reformers of the past. I feel it is more meaningful to focus on the smaller acts of questioning that can be practised in the everyday life of ordinary individuals. I will return to this question.

As Thapar says: intellectuals need to speak up. I wholeheartedly agree. But I have a few qualifications to make.

First, one must recognize that speaking up does not always have the same consequences. There are conjunctures in which certain types of voices are heard and matter; at other times similar voices may not be heard. The reception of what is said varies in different historical junctures.

If the secularist voice appeared hegemonic in the 1950s to the 70s, it does not resonate in the same way now; if the Gandhian voice was submerged under the high modernism of the Nehruvian era, it is now being appropriated by diverse

social movements, in India and abroad.

So reception matters and the social power of any vision and voice differs in different historical conjunctures. There is a difference between speaking, raising issues, questioning, elaborating ideas, and those thoughts becoming socially meaningful and effective. Individual thoughts do not always translate into effective social action. Utterances do not always have the same impact. They are not received in the same way.

Secondly, intellectuals need to always question, but they also need to be aware of the limits of that questioning, the limits of their power. All too often intellectual consensus at the top is mistaken for a wider societal consensus. We assume that our ideas are accepted because they are not being visibly questioned. This was the problematic illusion of the secularist-liberal consensus of the 1960s and 70s. Beneath the ostensible secular hegemony at that time was a deep structure of alternative imaginary—structured by other reasons, other visions, other choices. Repressed and seemingly silent, this other reason has expressed itself in many different ways in subsequent decades. What we may see as a later development has a longer historical lineage.

Third, public intellectuals need not only speak up, they need to think of small ways in which one can engage with alternative ways of thinking and being. Drawing upon the resources of Enlightenment reason may not be enough. We may need to dig deep into a variety of other intellectual resources, including—as I have already said—anti-Enlightenment thought.

Thapar's essay, I feel, is saturated with a deep nostalgia of times past—a time when the voice of intellectuals mattered and was heard; a time when they were visible public figures, revered and respected, powerful and influential. We now seem

to be witnessing a time when that world is threatened. We fear the disappearance of what we valued and celebrated, a loss of the ideals that secular, democratic intellectuals of the 1950s and 1960s cherished.

Is this because the intellectuals in the past acted in ways they no longer do, intervening in public life, questioning authority, and speaking up against powers that be? Possibly, but not entirely. The 1950s and 1960s were a time when the Nehruvian state opened up a space for intellectuals, a space within which they could plan, speak, act, offer suggestions about ways to restructure society, and take charge of public institutions. Intellectuals were heard by those in power, and their interventions were critical to the making of Nehruvian India.

The role of intellectuals was twofold. At one level, they critiqued old orthodoxies, questioned the colonial legacy, analysed the reasons for India's backwardness and unpacked the assumptions of colonial thought. At another, they helped define a new vision of independent India—one that constituted a new orthodoxy, and became seemingly hegemonic. They outlined the paths of development and growth, and formulated the corpus of categories through which the ideal society of the future could be imagined. They participated in debates about the meaning of democracy and secularism, helped establish public institutions, and became effective members of committees and commissions that devised the agendas of development in different fields.

Speech in this context was not the heroic speech of individuals standing against society, withstanding repression and silencing. It was the voice of those who had been given space, just as much as they constituted that space. It was the optimism of intellectuals derived partly from the optimism

of the time. The euphoria of independence was mellowed by the tragic events of Partition, but there was the promise of a new future that intellectuals could help mould. The national movement had opened up the possibilities of new worlds. Those imagined possibilities now had to be given concrete shape. Nehru drew upon the intellectual resources of the time to fashion the contours of the new economy, society, polity and culture. Intellectuals helped fashion the Nehruvian vision within which they enjoyed symbolic authority.

This space has now shrunk. Secular and democratic hegemony has for long been eroded. In many of the states different forms of authoritarianism have consolidated power, affirming diverse types of intolerance. The symbolic authority of intellectuals has been under question. Hindutva forces have operated within the terms of the Constitution at one level, and deployed a different language of politics at another: threatening writers, attacking dissenters, abusing those who speak up, harassing democratic activists, killing those who refuse to be silenced. Such forces depend on structures of fear at one level, even as they seek to win majorities in Parliament at another level. Islamic fundamentalists, similarly, have sought to police the practices and beliefs of everyday life, threatening those who have dared to disagree, issuing fatwas against writers, killing political activists, threatening journalists as well as ordinary citizens.

A nostalgic return to the past in such a context is not productive. The public intellectuals in the early post-independence decades operated in a milieu that is no longer there. The return to the past, however, can be meaningful in a negative sense. It can allow us to understand how the condition of our time is radically different, and how this difference will

define the languages and styles of intervention in the public life of intellectuals.

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Thapar's central concern is with silence. But what is the silence that is being talked of? And what does the silence express? For silence can mean different things.

Thapar is clearly speaking of silence as a negative quality. Silence, we know, has often been celebrated as a virtue. Philosophers have written lyrically about the expressive power of silence, its depth, its power to communicate. Silence, we have been told, can be more eloquent than words. It is pure, sacred, deep—as deep as eternity, as expansive as infinity. Only those who know the art of being silent can use words with power. Silence can be an active state of being, not a passive one. So the question that we need to consider is not just the act of being silent, but the timing of the silence, the meaning of the silence. When are people silent? Why are they silent? What does any specific form of silence connote?

As a negative quality, silence is the reluctance to speak up and question. This, however, can be expressive of various conditions of being. First, silence can be apathy. That is: it is not a deliberate choice to keep silent when your inner self questions what you see. It is the incapacity to react. It is the loss of a sensitivity and the capacity to be disturbed. It is that wretched state of being when what ought to shock no longer shocks, what should disturb no longer does. You lose the ability to feel. You read of violence and death, of tribal displacements and forced land acquisitions, of the predatory practices of capital and mining mafias, and you turn the pages of the newspaper, untouched by what you read, indifferent to

the tales of injustice. Apathy is 'not caring when the world falls apart', it is being indifferent when you see something wrong.

Second, silence can be nurtured by a sense of helplessness, from a belief in the futility of speech. That is, from a lack of faith in the efficacy of action. You feel like resisting, recognize the need to speak up, but cannot. Intervention appears impossible. Action seems pointless. You are convinced that nothing can be done to change the situation. The forces of opposition look overwhelming. A sense of hopelessness paralyses you.

Third, silence can be bred by fear. It is the refusal to speak up, to question, and to dissent, for fear of retaliatory action of authorities. You fear the consequences of speaking up, the personal implications of acts of dissent. It is sustained by a profound illusion that silence will protect. It is in a sense the failure of moral courage. Those who have fought against injustice have always bemoaned this silence. 'In the end,' Martin Luther King Jr. said, 'we will remember not the words of our enemies, but the silence of our friends.'

Thapar is talking of silence primarily in the third sense, a silence that is a sign of fear. We need to distinguish the different forms of silence and understand the conditions that sustain them. Addressing fear is different from dealing with apathy and helplessness. A rhetoric of courage will not shake people out of apathy, or overcome their sense of helplessness. Celebratory returns to past acts of courage and nostalgic references to heroic times will not inspire people to action. It would be voluntarism to believe that a rhetoric of action can move people to act regardless of the situation they are in. If there are times of hope and optimism when everyone speaks, and times of pessimism when silence becomes pervasive within society, then the conditions that define these differences need to be

understood. What we confront is a deeper societal malaise, not just the failure of individual moral courage.

As I have said at the outset, I agree with Thapar, that we need to resist being silenced. We need to speak up and act. But, as I have emphasized, we need to act in small ways at different sites, questioning, critiquing, and campaigning for small things. Everyone cannot follow the heroic examples of great individuals. We need to create the possibilities of a critical public culture, and sustain a public sphere within which dialogue and questioning is possible.

The public intellectual is not necessarily someone who intervenes self-consciously in the public to make a difference. She can be someone who helps in the constitution of a critical public through small interventions. As we know, the small voice also matters in history.

To conclude, I do not share Thapar's pessimism. She says: 'where there should be voices there is now often silence'. The picture is not as dismal. People *are* engaged in addressing a host of issues that she says need to be addressed: the fight for meaningful education, for justice and equality, for tolerance, secularism and democracy. There have been sustained movements against big dams and tribal displacements, against land acquisition and the demarcation of special economic zones, against nuclear armaments, and for peace. And those who have been at the forefront of these social movements need to be seen as public intellectuals in the widest sense of the term. Not all is achieved. Not all is lost. The communal authoritarian forces are not as strong as they think they are.

THE INDIAN INTELLECTUAL AND THE HINDU-MUSLIM TRAP

JAWED NAQVI

When Professor Romila Thapar read her paper on the role of the public intellectual in India to a very worried audience in a packed hall at the India International Centre in October 2014, Narendra Modi was the country's new prime minister. In subsequent months it seemed that nothing would stop the momentum he had found during the elections.

Nevertheless, the political change that was so badly needed began in Delhi when its voters elected a muffler-clad candidate, who seemed fit for a cough syrup ad, as chief minister, not once but twice, over his alpha-male rival. That resistance also spread to other parts of the country. Indeed, this hasn't been the only occasion when Thapar and like-minded intellectuals have impacted the political choice that people have made. Their influence has not been direct, hasn't been accompanied by fanfare, but it has made itself felt unobtrusively.

In the absence of a vibrant political movement that once led the Indian people towards reasoned choices, in harmony with the lofty ideals the early leaders showed in framing in the Constitution, India's intellectuals seem to have stepped in.

Here are a couple of other examples of how effective they have been. The amazing restraint shown after the harrowing

Mumbai terror attack in 2008 was one such occasion. Ordinary people rejected the militarist solution on offer and thwarted right-wing nationalist calls for revenge. They also resisted their corporate TV hustlers who are in perpetual need of contrived strife to distract from real ones. Orson Welles' *Citizen Kane* was modelled on the notorious American media tycoon, Randolph Hearst, whose penchant for fuelling the flames of foreign war was part of a flourishing business. An influential section of the Indian media today bears considerable resemblance to the Hearst-Murdoch formula of profiting from jingoism and mayhem.

The Indian people showed an unambiguous resolve, however, to defeat the narrow nationalism that tried to take advantage of the Mumbai terror nightmare. In the 2009 general elections, with a nudge from India's intellectuals, they handed the Manmohan Singh-led Congress coalition an unexpected, some say undeserved, second term in office.

Let us step back to an earlier event. In May 1998, hysterical politicians and nationalist mobs exulted over the borrowed power of nuclear manhood. That was when, yet again, reason came into play. The guiding hand of intellectual-activists in the political choices made should not go unnoticed. On that occasion, too, ordinary voters stretching from Delhi to faraway Manipur, to Madhya Pradesh and Rajasthan, where Pokhran is located, responded in the only way they have always dealt with the politics of machismo: they settled for a distinctly non-macho option in the four state elections that came on the heels of the nuclear tests.

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The title of Thapar's paper, which is also the title of her essay

in this book, is phrased as a gentle démarche, a wake-up call to a frayed liberal constituency. Given the ability of our intellectuals to perform great rearguard actions at crucial social and political junctures, the seeming indecision stalking them of late is worrying. There are signs of fatigue and confusion among them. Moments of crisis, like the prevailing political climate, come as a test of a nation's intellectual resilience. The weaker tend to abandon ship. Likening the tendency to Hamlet's death wish, Thapar exhorts fellow intellectuals to not get overwhelmed by the challenges arising from the consolidation of the political right.

Thapar's reference to the Dreyfus Affair and Émile Zola nicely helped locate the historical role the 'public intellectual' has played in shaping societies and their evolving worldviews, including India's. As a result of her essay, you can identify the points of departure made by thinkers such as the Buddha and Socrates in ancient discourse. Yet, if we look for public intellectuals in our midst today, we are likely to be reminded of a jukebox with just a handful of popular records that play over and over, though they never fail to set off new reveries. There are far too few voices in this country of a million arguments. I believe Thapar expressed this anxiety rather forcefully.

What has gone wrong? Many things. But one of the challenges liberal intellectuals in India have faced, as we know, is plain calumny and slander from the resurgent right. This has happened elsewhere as well, and, in fact, seems to be part of the standard operating procedure in the ad hominem targeting of liberal voices. One of the early gurus of calumny targeting celebrated intellectuals was British journalist Paul Johnson who wrote the 1988 pacesetter for mudslinging—*Intellectuals*. The book presented a scurrilous account of the

minds that have shaped the modern world. Johnson's quarries included Jean-Jacques Rousseau, P. B. Shelley, Karl Marx, Henrik Ibsen, Leo Tolstoy, Ernest Hemingway, Bertrand Russell, Bertolt Brecht, Jean-Paul Sartre, Edmund Wilson, Victor Gollancz, Lillian Hellman, Cyril Connolly, Norman Mailer, James Baldwin, Kenneth Tynan and Noam Chomsky. Occasionally, albeit condescendingly labelled brilliant, these men and women were accused of lapses in personal life, including, believe it or not, their sense of hygiene. 'The revolutionary thinkers whose ideas have shaped intellectual history over the past 250 years were, for the most part, lousy human beings', wrote one reviewer of Johnson's book, siding with the author. But what could we have expected? As a staunch conservative, Johnson opposed Nixon's impeachment, yet supported Clinton's, while he was himself alleged to have been involved in an eleven-year affair during his marriage. It should not be surprising, therefore, that India's own home-grown right-wing ideologues talk about the accounting practices of academic institutions headed by left or liberal intellectuals. 'Anti-Hindu', 'traitor', 'five-star activist', 'closet Muslim' are some of the labels thrown at liberal intellectuals. But, as Thapar says, we need to carry on.

Before I move on to the issues that our public intellectuals need to tackle head-on, I would like to highlight a few things. The first has to do with a liberal trait that needs to be eliminated if we are to be more effective in dealing with the challenges we are faced with. The liberal trait I am decrying is the romanticizing of victimhood. It is cringe-making to watch comrades erupt into Faiz Ahmed Faiz's poetry whenever they run across a snag they can't overcome.

Mata-e-lauh-o-qalam chhin gayee to kya gham hai,
ke khooney dil mein dubo li hai ungliyan mainey.

You've taken away the quill and the inkpot,
but I have learnt to dip my fingers in my blood to write
the subversive verse.

Tell that to the writer and academic Wendy Doniger whose book was pulped to appease state-sponsored obscurantists. Recite Faiz to the students of history at Delhi University whose classrooms were ransacked because they wanted to read an absorbing commentary about the different traditions of the story of Ram. At the peak of the Gujarat killings, a well-known leftist NGO staged a protest at India Gate in Delhi. Bereft of new content in the absence of an IPTA-like cultural bulwark that spawned the needed political motifs, a young singer at this protest crooned a rather inappropriate Amir Khusrau qawwali—Chhap tilak sab chheeni mosey naina milaeke (You've taken away my looks, my identity, by just a glance)! Far too frequently this romantic streak saps the liberal's ability to fight a frontal fight with every stripe of offending politics.

Another point that needs to be made is that public intellectuals need to be more aware of what's going on, especially when it comes to the insidious ways in which communal poison is spread. Take, for example, Indian cinema. It is lauded for shoring up our society's secular ethos. But we rarely discuss an eerie sociology that is mutating below the elitist radar. As a student at JNU, I learnt to appreciate music, films and theatre. Federico Fellini, Luis Buñuel, Akira Kurosawa, Sergei Eisenstein, Satyajit Ray, Shyam Benegal, Saeed Mirza and others were woven into the academic fabric. They continue to be part of the discourse in the media, in seminar halls and

so forth. Yet, there is a chasm between the discussions that take place in these intellectual hothouses and what captures the popular imagination. In the 1960s, a prohibition officer with a fondness for his evening tipple would hold screenings of *Sakshi Gopal*, *Kan Kan Mein Bhagwan*, etc., in our Lucknow neighbourhood—films resplendent with divine miracles and a perceptibly missionary Hindu slant. That was the government's way of discouraging people from consuming alcohol.

In 1978, during his time as information minister, L. K. Advani showcased his communal agenda. On one occasion, for example, he screened a 1950s movie on Doordarshan that spewed venom against India's Christians. This slipped under most radars. At the time his government was supported by the left and the attention of much of the intelligentsia was riveted to the return of democracy after the defeat of Indira Gandhi's authoritarian regime. The black-and-white film was *Swayamsiddh*. The story in a nutshell is this: a Hindu woman, whose husband is deaf and dumb, is urged by the village purohit to evict a group of Christian missionaries from the village because that would cure the husband. The Hindu wife gets the villagers to attack and expel the Christians and the husband is healed.

Jagriti is another film to remember, very popular with children. It was years before anyone realized the communal appeal of its popular song: Aao bachchon tumhey dikhaen jhanki Hindustan ki... Shivaji thrashed the Mughals; every brave woman became Padmini and jumped into the fire to escape Muslim assault. Every child shouted 'Har Har Mahadev'. We may continue to see subtle, secular movies such as *Mammo* or *Garam Hawa* and sing Sahir Ludhianvi songs about India's innate insaniyat, but the damage is not undone.

Communal discord is spread in such innocuous yet lasting ways. The insidious strategy works in other arenas of culture. There are compelling reasons why Hindutva-run schools would never risk teaching Ghalib or Mir or so many other Urdu poets who mock the stereotype of Hindu-hating Indian Muslims. Not surprisingly, these cultural mascots from our past are equally shunned in Muslim seminaries of Pakistan for just as valid or invalid a reason. How else would either of them whip up the required mistrust of the 'other' if their cadre were to be exposed to, say, Mir Taqi Mir's couplet from the nineteenth century's cultural ambience?

> Chhor ker sab deeno-imaan Mir jiske waastey
> Hum huey kaafir to wo kaafir Musalman ho gaya
>
> I forsook my faith to become a kafir like the beloved
> The beloved betrayed me and turned a Muslim instead

For Muslim extremists, Mir is deserving of the ultimate punishment for deserting his religion. For proponents of Hindutva, the far-sighted poet poses a more contemporary threat—an artificially conjured enemy, a 'love-jihadi' who they claim preys on Hindu daughters. There has been a little discussed yet worrying affinity, even bonding, between the Hindu and Muslim revivalists of the subcontinent. They both mistrust the liberals within their respective folds. It is natural, therefore, for Hindutva in India to emulate its narrow-minded Muslim counterparts in Pakistan to jointly target the genial Emperor Akbar, otherwise considered a symbol of enlightenment and religious harmony.

According to recent reports, Hindutva historians are working feverishly to rob Akbar of his supposedly secular

halo. (I say supposedly, because I have a problem with the Hindu-Muslim binary applied to a mediaeval ruler.) Anyway, Hindutva groups want to project Hemu, a Hindu chieftain who briefly gave Akbar a hard time, as the last grand emperor of Hindu India.

Goebbelsian mythmaking can succeed in the short run but it will not be able to completely airbrush the hard evidence produced by Professor Sharif Husain Qasemi on Akbar's behalf.

As India's leading Persian scholar, Qasemi has published an amazing book—a descriptive catalogue of Persian translations of Indian works. Sanskrit work related to the Hindu religion, philosophy, mysticism, medicine, mathematics, astronomy, music, history, romance, historical and semi-historical tales and 'moral fables', together with some works on the Sikh religion have been catalogued. Qasemi describes his seminal work with rare modesty. It is a record, he says, 'of the endeavours of Muslims in India to understand their ancient homeland and its magnificent culture in a large scene'. At the popular level, Dara Shikoh was one of the last notable Mughal princes to be credited with translating Hindu scriptures from Sanskrit into Persian. The fact is that, as Qasemi illustrates, Dara was only following a tradition that emulated Akbar and others who preceded the Great Mughal by a few centuries. For example, Mohammed bin Qasim's conquest of Sindh in AD 711 and his cordial and friendly ties with the local Brahmins are recorded in *Fath Nama-i-Sindh*, popularly known as the Chach Nama. The original Arabic manuscript was lost without a trace, but Qasemi has catalogued its Persian translation in the reign of Nasiruddin Qabacha. It was an early attempt by Muslims arriving in India to blend with the local culture.

Qasemi read out a lovely story from his Persian papers

about Emperor Akbar: The ruler had ordered the translation of the Sanskrit epic Mahabharata into Persian. His close associates found Abdul Qadir Badayuni appropriate for the job. Although he was a highly competent translator, Badayuni was a narrow-minded Muslim. Akbar knew of this tendency, and was wary of him. When the first translation of the Mahabharata, translated as *Razmnama*—or chronicle of wars—was placed before him, Akbar wondered why it carried references to heaven and hell for the righteous and evil-doers respectively. As a young prince he had learnt of the Hindu faith in the transmigration of souls, but nothing of hell and heaven. He reported the matter to the Fazl-Faizi duo, who collared Badayuni. For all his puritanism, Badayuni writes about how he brought Brahmin priests before the emperor—they advised him that the concept of hell and heaven did in fact exist in Hindu philosophy. That's how Akbar the ruler-cum-editor allowed the second edition of the Mahabharata to be published. He got it distributed to the elite to make them understand and embrace the great culture they were privileged to savour, says Qasemi.

India's Muslim rulers translated into Persian other Hindu scriptures too. I tell Hindutva interlocutors how, in recent years, I made time (by not celebrating Dussehra or Diwali) to start reading the Persian-to-Hindi translation (in three volumes) of the epic Ramayana. They rejoice. To make things puzzling for the simpletons, I tell them how a Hindu scribe named Sumer Chand wrote the Valmiki Ramayana in Persian. To make it even more perverse for Hindutva, two Muslim scholars at Rampur's famed Raza Library translated the Ramayana into chaste Hindi from its Persian version.

However, in all this secular bonhomie, we are ignoring a crucial sociological lapse. Look at Mir Taqi Mir's Hindu-

Muslim bonding from the perspective of the Dalits. Or appraise Emperor Akbar's keen interest in translating ancient Indian books into Persian from the same perspective. A Dalit might see Akbar through the lens that we see Modi—both opposed cow slaughter to appease their upper-caste constituencies. Why should the ban on beef eating be deemed as communal today (which it is), while periodic Mughal intervention against cow slaughter is hailed as a secular tradition? Akbar was a great ruler, but the secular label is an upper-caste innovation. Time now to ask a blunt question. Do India's public intellectuals have a preponderantly upper-caste social lineage? For example, how many Dalits or tribespeople can we count in the national think tanks—not in their 'own' groups, but in public think tanks? About a decade ago a survey of accredited journalists in Delhi showed zero Dalits on the rolls. I am told there are now two or three Dalits in Delhi's newsrooms. The social composition of TV presenters (and proprietors) gets reflected in the choice of topics that are discussed. When movie icons Javed Akhtar and Shabana Azmi complained they were not able to buy a house—they meant another house—because they bore Muslim names, the media took copious notes. Such discussions are generally muddled if they also deliberately obfuscate reality. They ignore the fact that a far larger community of Indians is routinely denied water from the solitary village well, leave alone finding a house in caste mohallas. Is Indian society, therefore, a coalition of self-obsessed and usually elitist victimhoods? If it is, what are we to do about it? B. R. Ambedkar had some useful answers, and I shall come to that in a moment.

At the risk of probing an unpopular counterfactual space, should we not put a greater focus of our enquiry on the prevalent caste consciousness within our society? It would be a

good place to start a political journey. It is axiomatic that our public intellectuals and thinking elite, both with a regressive mindset and those belonging to a relatively enlightened cluster, come predominantly from a common layer of caste hierarchies. Shouldn't that worry us?

Let's return to Ambedkar. Why do we shun him? When the Buddha or the Charvaka ideologues broke through the hidebound system and challenged it, there was a price to pay and the reaction was not equal and opposite, it was overwhelming and devastating. We may not share Ambedkar's despair all the time but the fact remains that he was unfairly punished for holding his supposedly subversive—read anti-Brahminical—views. And he paid an inordinately heavy price, not the least that his people continue to be brutalized and exploited at the bottom of India's social heap.

I am not a trained social scientist, much less a qualified historian, to comment on issues that require deep research. What I feel equipped to do as a journalist, however, is to look for the factors which either impede liberal enquiry or shape the mind of the public intellectual. It has been evident in similar critical situations in the past that public discourse in India is unfairly primed. It raises habitual issues concerning secularism and democracy, and occasionally even socialism. But it is reluctant to heed Ambedkar's call to liberate Hindus from ritual and prejudice. Why did we settle for a religion-vending Gandhi when we actually needed an Atatürk? It would, of course, have been a bonus had both been able to prevent the holocausts their worldviews triggered—Hindu, Muslim, Sikh, Armenian. Is the intellectual chasm ranged around Gandhi a reflection of the social divide?

My main reason for standing with Ambedkar, and not with

his opponents, is both personal and political. I am of the view that the Hindu-Muslim binary, which sometimes mutates into smaller communal fissures—Hindu-Sikh or Hindu-Christian—is a red herring, a legacy from Gandhi.

It happens with each communal cataclysm that befalls the country. 'We can't tolerate another partition.' That's what the shrill secularists cried out when Babri Masjid was demolished in 1992 under the joint watch of a Brahmin prime minister and a backward-caste Lodh chief minister. On the other hand, the far more widespread daily abuse of Dalits is treated as the inevitable outcome of an abhorrent caste system. It is relegated to the 'to do' file.

A haunting question that has not elicited a satisfactory response from liberal thinkers and other opinion makers is this: What drives a communal riot, a pervasive feature of life in large swathes of India? Ambedkar knew the answer but we have already decided to shut him out. Communal riots were directly linked, in his view, to the maintenance and consolidation of a caste society. Take this typically cutting passage from *Annihilation of Caste* (a book that Dalit intellectuals regard as their bible), an idea that can also be glimpsed in Thapar's 1989 essay 'Syndicated Hinduism'.

> The first and foremost thing that must be recognised is that Hindu society is a myth. The name Hindu is itself a foreign name. It was given by the Mahomedans to the natives for the purpose of distinguishing themselves. It does not occur in any Sanskrit work prior to the Mahomedan invasion. They did not feel the necessity of a common name, because they had no conception of their having constituted a community. Hindu society

> as such does not exist. It is only a collection of castes. Each caste is conscious of its existence. Its survival is the be-all and end-all of its existence. Castes do not even form a federation. A caste has no feeling that is affiliated to other castes, except when there is a Hindu-Moslem riot. On all other occasions each caste endeavours to segregate itself and to distinguish itself from other castes.

Is it not relevant to see the recent upsurge in ghar wapsi—the campaign to 'bring back' Muslims and Christians who have 'strayed' from the Hindu dharma—through Ambedkar's lens?

According to the National Crime Records Bureau, quoted in a new edition of the *Annihilation of Caste*, a crime is committed against a Dalit by a non-Dalit every sixteen minutes; every day, more than four Untouchable women are raped by Touchables; every week, thirteen Dalits are murdered and six Dalits are kidnapped. In 2012 alone, the year of the Delhi gang rape and murder, 1,574 Dalit women were raped (the rule of thumb is that only 10 per cent of rapes or other crimes against Dalits are ever reported, says the author and activist Arundhati Roy). And 651 were murdered. That's just the rape and butchery. Not the stripping and parading naked and many other ways of showing Dalits their place.

There are no convincing answers as to how or when Indian intellectuals came to prefer highlighting the religious binary over and above the equally if not more insidious caste contradictions that run deeper across the entire country. A less discussed explanation perhaps goes back to the controversial Poona Pact (1932) in which Gandhi forced Ambedkar to accede to his conditions regarding the Dalits. A question seldom encouraged is: Is it not curious that Gandhi was prepared to

accept a religious partition of India (his ultimate stand being that Pakistan should not be cheated of its small but useful share of funds from the state coffers of British India)? On the other hand he threatened to kill himself if the Untouchables were allowed to walk away from the Hindu fold. He simply refused to acknowledge that Ambedkar had the right to represent the Dalits, a right that Gandhi agreed to grant to Jinnah where Muslims were concerned.

Ambedkar was not happy at all with the Poona Pact. He was angrier at the way he was made to sign it.

> There was nothing noble in the fast. It was a filthy act... It was the worst form of coercion against a helpless people to give up the constitutional safeguards of which they had become possessed under the Prime Minister's Award, and agree to live at the mercy of the Hindus. It was a vile and wicked act. How can the Untouchables regard such a man as honest and sincere?

Gandhi, who was in jail, did not sign the pact. It is a telling comment on the sociology of Hindu revivalism where we realize how communal and caste interests came together in the form of Gandhi's associates who signed the Poona Pact on his behalf. The list of signatories, highlighted by Arundhati Roy in her introduction to the *Annihilation of Caste*, reveals an illuminating aspect of sociology.

> G.D. Birla, Gandhi's industrialist-patron; Pandit Madan Mohan Malaviya, a conservative Brahmin leader and founder of the Right-Wing Hindu Mahasabha (of which Gandhi's future assassin Nathuram Godse was a member); V. D. Savarkar, accused in conspiracy in

> Gandhi's assassination, who also served as president of the Mahasabha; Palwankar Baloo, Untouchable cricketer of the Chamar caste, who was celebrated earlier as a sporting idol by Ambedkar, and whom the Congress and the Hindu Mahasabha propped up as an opponent of Ambedkar; and of course, M. S. Rajah (who would, much later, regret his collusion with Gandhi, the Hindu Mahasabha and the Congress).

While figures of the number of Muslims killed or rendered homeless in the Gujarat pogroms on Narendra Modi's watch are routinely debated, there has been limited discussion by public intellectuals about how the other side benefitted from the massacre. Are communal riots instigated only to win elections, as the dominant lore goes, or do they bring greater rewards to the Vedic order by bringing new blood into the Hindutva fold? Don't Dalits, tribespeople, and other communities at the bottom of the social pyramid find a reason to feel elated at being declared Hindus, or when the police befriend them as allies instead of making life hell for them? Doesn't a riot give them a spanking new identity, a rare reason to celebrate, an enemy that they can oppress just as they were once oppressed?

What else have we ignored for far too long? How many of us can afford not to be aware of the broad facts about Gandhi's Salt Satyagraha of 1930? The event is flaunted as a defining one that set the course for India's independence from British rule. But how many of us know about Ambedkar's Mahad Water Satyagraha? That too was a freedom struggle, not from colonialism, perhaps, but from oppressive fellow Indians, from the Brahmins. The Brahmins had sought to subvert a colonial law that allowed Untouchables to take water from communal

ponds in Maharashtra, and Ambedkar decided to challenge it (March 1927). He won the round but tragically lost the battle. Gandhi challenged a different colonial law three years later (March 1930) and was richly rewarded for his copycat passive resistance.

Caste divisions and prejudices extend to other faiths. Consider this example of an unseemly airbrushing of history concerning the Begum of Awadh. We are told over and over again with Vedic monotony that Begum Hazrat Mahal played a heroic role in India's battle against British rule, which she evidently did. Take a less discussed dimension of her personality and you can be certain that the fabled queen would not pass muster today in this company. It transpires that one of the reasons why Hazrat Mahal fought the British was that she was upset by their more democratic values—they gave equal rights to the lower castes as to people of rank and status. The documentation (by the Indian Council of Historical Research) of the proclamations issued by the rebel leaders of the 1857 uprising throws into sharp relief the social history of that era.

In a proclamation dated 25 June 1858, Hazrat Mahal, speaking on behalf of her son Birjis Qadar, Wali of Awadh, laments that the British did not respect the social hierarchies that her kingdom set so much store by.

> The honour and respectability of every person of high extraction are considered (by the British) equal to the honour and respectability of the lower orders... 'Nay, compared with the latter, they treat the former with contempt and disrespect. Wherever they go they hang the respectable persons to death, and at the instance of the Chamar, force the attendance of a Nawab or a Rajah,

and subject him to indignity.'

> Everyone follows his own religion (in my domain). And enjoys respect according to their worth and status. Men of high extraction, be they Syed, Sheikh, Mughal or Pathan among the Mohammedans, or Brahmin, Kshatriya, Vaish or Kayasth among the Hindus, all these retain the respectability according to their respective ranks. And all persons of a lower order such as a Sweeper, Chamar, Dhanook, or Pasi cannot claim equality with them.

Clearly, the deep-seated legacy of the Vedic elite, which would rile Ambedkar seven decades later, had crossed the religious divide and been imbibed by India's Muslims as well. Behind the picture-perfect image of Lucknow as the ultimate Hindu-Muslim bhai-bhai utopia (in which the two communities live peacefully and attend each other's Holi and Eid celebrations) lies the sordid reality of the pervasive caste structure. Secularists fail to address the issue of the 'wretched' Dalits, whom Hazrat Mahal, the early icon of Hindu-Muslim amity, had scorned with her poisonous *Ishtehaarnama*.

In our continuing obsession with the Hindu-Muslim binary, much secular fuss has been made about the fact that in pre-Partition years pitchers of water placed on railway platforms were labelled Hindu paani and Muslim paani. There were also Hindu gymkhanas and Muslim gymkhanas. Look at it through Ambedkar's prism: Would Dalits from either community have been allowed to access either of the two pitchers? Dalits would see in it the Hazrat Mahal formula. If public intellectuals have pondered the question, what was the solution they arrived at? There must be a sociological reason why Indians have learnt (at least I did) about Rosa Parks' contribution to the American

civil rights movement years before becoming aware of Pandita Ramabai or the Mahad Satyagraha.

Ambedkar's reputation as the man who could stand up to Gandhi has not gone down well with India's spuriously nonviolent mobs. Nehru, however, was an exemplary public intellectual of his time with a more eclectic leaning. He critiqued the self-righteous trend even among our medieval intellectuals, which the eleventh-century chronicler from Khorasan, Al-Biruni, brought to his notice. Al-Biruni observations ranged from the overstated to the astute, but the following observation could be handy. Hindus believe, he said, that 'no created beings besides them have any knowledge of science whatsoever...'

It is strange therefore that in recent days some Indian intellectuals have found themselves sniggering at ill-advised claims that miraculous surgery existed in ancient India. They snigger in a self-limiting way. Why target a socially less privileged politician for conjuring up embarrassing claims about our past when the source of the mischief lies in the higher caste echelons, which may, ironically enough, include many of his critics?

Gandhi unwittingly or deliberately (none can say) courted a regressive leadership of Muslims while cultivating the most dubious Hindu allies. The proof of this can be glimpsed in the dramatis personae that pressed for the Poona Pact and those who fought for a morally untenable Khilafat Movement. One spawned the Hindu right the other their Muslim pacesetters.

Perhaps the only sensible course for the public intellectual today is to work for a sound strategy to blend Ambedkar's fight for the annihilation of caste with the overarching liberal struggle for social justice. It is probably the only worthwhile way for India to keep its tryst with the promise of secularism,

democracy, gender and social equality. If we want Ambedkar to stop stalking our collective conscience, we must overcome the lure of playing the 'wrong' version of Prince Hamlet.

Staying with Thapar's Shakespearean allegory, Ambedkar was not Hamlet's usurper villain. He comes to us, in fact, as the disturbed spirit of the man who continues to be wronged, whose people, more than any other, remain trapped in a labyrinth of prejudice. Religious fascism in India can be confronted, not by concocting an ineffective secular Hindu-Muslim remedy, but by systematically defeating agrarian fascism that has flourished in the country on the back of a hidebound caste system.

If there's something rotten in the state of Denmark, to continue with the Shakespearean metaphor about India's intellectuals—and there's little doubt that the rot is deep—can we hope to set it right by appealing to the conscience of India's intellectuals? What if they wake up from their stupor and direct us to the old path again, the one which has brought us to the current mess?

What if a sizeable body of intellectuals end up making a Faustian bargain with the system, a possibility Thapar has hinted at. Would that not be of a piece with an elementary Marxist caution—that the middle classes are a cluster of vacillating interests? And the public intellectual is after all a middle-class being.

In the Indian context though, there is a greater worry—that of the pervasive dominance of caste as an ally of the class of the thinking elite. It has the power to manipulate the thinker and influence the thinking they impart or the choices they make. 'Why have the Brahmins not produced a Voltaire?' Ambedkar wondered aloud in 1948. 'A Voltaire among

the Brahmins would be a positive danger to the maintenance of a civilization, which is contrived to maintain Brahminic supremacy.'

We need not accept Ambedkar's prescriptions in their entirety. Nor are we endorsing his untenable colonial description of India's tribal communities as savages. Yet, can we honestly afford to ignore the moral and intellectual force only he could have brought to describing the rot in the state of India? Does the putrid stench elude certain ingrained sensibility? It is that sensibility, consciously or reflexively, that set India's Hindu-Muslim trap into which Jinnah and Gandhi, Nehru and Azad plunged headlong.

As for the current crop of Indian intellectuals, too many of them have done everything to hand over Ambedkar's legacy to his Hindutva foes. In doing so they may have surrendered the only fighting chance anyone had to redeem the pledge to India's democracy. In the process we may be sawing off the branch of the tree that our dreams are perched on.

Finally, let's share some thoughts on the situation on the ground. Thapar spoke about the Charvakas, their questioning spirit and stubborn atheism in ancient India. How improbable that legacy seems today as we watch millions swayed by India's state-backed obscurantism dished out on 24x7 TV channels. 'The great churning, the amrit manthan was the world's first industrial revolution. How? Because it produced all the material necessities to address human needs.' TV-savvy godmen mouthing similar inanities serve to undermine the pursuit of reason and rational explanations for our pervasive social problems. These include poverty, gender bias and crucial arenas of social strife. Reason appears to be in a free fall as the TV charlatan prescribes sharing a kilo of barfi with the neighbours

so that the teary-eyed petitioner can get the elusive 'permanent government job' for the elder son.

Ambedkar would have a comment or two on this:

> I hate all the mahatmas and firmly believe that they should be done away with. I am of the opinion that their existence is a curse to the nation in which they are born. They try to perpetuate blind faith in place of intelligence and reason.

Far from heeding Ambedkar's call against the menace of blind faith, we find ourselves silently witnessing growing attacks on rationalist activists across India.

Can we think of one channel anywhere in the country that will not stifle the most elementary scientific enquiry? Can we begin to discuss even kindergarten concepts such as creation and evolution on Indian television or any other public space without incurring someone's wrath? Banish the thought of debating the Communist Manifesto, even if you want to highlight its many flaws. The United States, the hub of corporate control, has sprouted an Atheist channel recently, which I believe is doing well. Can we even imagine this in today's India, in the land of Charvakas and the more recent Dravida movements? In the absence of a more representative social basket of intellectuals, the burden of interpreting society will continue to rest precariously on the over-burdened shoulders of the current crop of public intellectuals.

What we will miss here is a second pair of eyes. Be it Ambedkar's exclusive insights into Dalit sociology, or D. D. Kosambi's wider canvas of Indian historiography, or Professor M. Mujib's investigations of the caste system that places India's Muslims into less discussed layers of hierarchical order, often of

competing interests, a review by professionals preferably from a different social milieu could be immensely useful. A second pair of eyes, to use a journalistic example, need not be the armchair editor. On the contrary, the mofussil reporter would be more reliable.

Speaking of which, we need more 'mofussil intellectuals', for they are likelier to have anticipated the Ayodhya fiasco. In hindsight Ayodhya seems to have spawned a campaign, which hasn't ended, to consolidate two constituencies—the Muslim right and the Hindu right. Also, its less discussed goal was to polarize the Dalits and the tribespeople with the lure of a new social respectability vis-à-vis the pummelled religious minorities, say Muslims. Another clear objective was to squeeze out and discard the liberal voices. Had that not been so, who knows, the obscure mosque in Ayodhya would have been acquired peacefully and no one would have noticed. (After all, it is alleged, a business tycoon did quietly acquire Muslim waqf land for a pittance.)

The intention of the Ayodhya movement was not about a negotiated settlement. Had there been no mosque the kar sevaks would have had to build one to demolish it for the TV cameras. I have been apprised of this engaging mofussil analysis in Ayodhya by local journalists. Public intellectuals not exposed to a social mix in their ranks can find themselves fettered by their circumstances to correctly grasp the less grandiose truths.

For this reason, among others, they may not be able to see through the state's agenda of persisting with the Hindu-Muslim binary. Setting up the Muslim Personal Law Board, for example, has seldom riled the larger body of intellectuals as it does liberal Muslims. The board gives an instantly brewed fatwa and the state goes into a mock tizzy. The supposedly secular state thus wants the ideal Muslim to go to the mosque

and his Hindu counterpart to go to the temple. Nowhere else in the world is Haj subsidy given by the state or the services of the army requisitioned to help with a religious pilgrimage to a remote cave shrine in the mountains. The plan seems to be to fasten unsuspecting people to unquestioning and unbridled social control. The Halalkhor and the Mehtar among Muslim Dalits should thus ideally join the Friday queue to the mosque, if the secular state of Gandhi's dream continues to have its way. The Pasi and the Chamar, whom he characterized as Hindu, should similarly fall in line before the temple gates. This is what the RSS seeks to promote, in cahoots with India's state-sponsored Muslim leadership. Is this not what Gandhi dreamt for India in a less critiqued alliance with Maulana Azad who conjured a Khilafat Movement to fight colonialism? Azad's personal exposure to the rampant use of Hindu symbols in the nationalist awakening in Bengal was harnessed by Gandhi to lure the more conservative Muslims to his concept of a free India, but it worked against Ambedkar's secular instincts.

To conclude, we could perhaps return to Begum Hazrat Mahal's Hindu-Muslim bhai-bhai rubric that she and her forebears commandeered to rule a chunk of the Indian empire. While we applaud her ill-fated husband, the exiled ruler Wajid Ali Shah, as a great exponent of Kathak, Thumri and Indian ballet, Oudh's Hindu-Muslim binary didn't work for it in 1857. It didn't work for India in 1947. And it has failed to show a favourable prognosis for the post-independence evolution of our polity.

What makes everything worse, as I have tried to point out in this essay, is that the focus on the Hindu-Muslim binary, whether by design or default, has made us miss out on a far

more inequitable feature in Indian society—the way in which Dalits continue to be treated. For this, our public intellectuals must take their share of the blame.

CONCLUSION: THE SOCIETY WE WANT TO LIVE IN

ROMILA THAPAR

As we have seen throughout this book, a society like the one we live in needs its public intellectuals: people who can ask the right questions at relevant moments. Any such question has to begin with a doubt: one can't begin to question without that. In Nyaya philosophy, as Sundar Sarukkai explains, doubt is an important category of philosophical analysis when it asks: Is S 'p' or 'q'? Do we even ask this particular question or do we not ask at all? The resolving of the doubt in a sense answers the question. Doubt, of course, is dependent on initial belief, such as what are one's beliefs about how society is organized and does one have doubts about this organization?

The kinds of questions one raises are partially linked to foundational beliefs. This is perhaps a possible difference between what we call liberal left and liberal right. Knowing what to question and questioning meaningfully is again partly derived from the foundational beliefs of the questioner. Questioning the foundation on which we stand is rarely a sudden move. There is a preface and a preparation by which the new foundation gradually replaces the old. This is not a seismic shift but an almost imperceptible one. The power of the shift becomes apparent subsequent to its taking place. Questions relating to

social injustices of various kinds are of course perennial and require the attention of the public intellectual.

The idea of scepticism I also found quite fascinating, because there is a difference of course between questioning, doubt and scepticism. Scepticism is rather like doubt; it encourages you to question, but need not lead to the questioning itself. So it's a kind of preface to asking questions, but is significant in determining the kinds of questions that one needs to ask. It encourages the counter-factual question that may be assumed in a critical enquiry but not necessarily articulated.

Moving on to the conditions that are necessary to asking questions, clearly, there are some conditions in which one simply doesn't ask questions. These may be political conditions of totalitarianism, where it might perhaps be thought injudicious to question, or there may be other conditions in which questions are conducive, but the nature of the questions that one asks is linked to the ambience of other questions that are being generally asked. That is an area that I think does need exploration. I mean, questioning is not simply a one-off: it is something that does take time to formulate, and there are procedures and processes towards doing that. And there is always the need to have some idea of what the questioning is leading to and whether and why this is a meaningful direction.

That some traditional social strata do not provide the culture for questioning needs to be discussed because the nature of questioning and asking questions changes historically and philosophically, as one moves from one historical condition to another or indeed one social level to another. And, yes, Jawed Naqvi's comment on the social identity of intellectuals is, I think, extremely important. In the reconstruction of an early period of Indian social history, initially by historians and

commentators of the upper caste, they read it in one way. And then when Phule and Ambedkar read the same texts, they read them differently. And again, which construction is accepted has much to do with the kind of people who are in a sense controlling and dispensing knowledge—the practitioners of knowledge and the possibilities of questioning them. Their intellectual background is also important to understanding the knowledge being dispensed, sometimes as important as their political intentions may be.

I'm glad the question of TV channels and the media has been raised. In my essay I stated that I'm disturbed that the media seems hesitant to ask questions that get to the heart of the matter. Is this because it is partisan to existing authority and the foci of power? I had suggested the setting up of an independent radio station, since an independent TV channel would be prohibitively expensive. Would this be a feasible idea? It could broadcast for a few hours each morning and evening and it could be a platform on which alternate views could be debated. After all, the oral tradition is still very strong, and it might be an effective mechanism to help people to think more broadly, more widely, more deeply about questions that bother them.

Dhruv Raina has referred to the question of scientific thinking, and the distinction that he has made is significant. It is not just a relationship between science and society, but it also involves taking a position: does one fall on this side of the fence or on the other? It does involve considering the kind of society that is envisaged in the type of scientific research that is being done. It was an immanent question soon after World War II for obvious reasons but that debate has rather faded away and has not been revived. It comes up starkly these

days in discussions on the location of nuclear power plants and some other environmental concerns. But the flow of effluents sludging up our water supply is generally discussed only as an environmental issue. The intentions of scientific research are I think an important consideration, and however much we may regard people like Bernal as somewhat passé now—and this may be part of nostalgia—nevertheless, I do regard Bernal as being someone who made relevant statements about the interface of science and society. I continue to think so even though both society and science have changed as also has our comprehension of the interface.

Even in the present context, I can't really think of more than a tiny number of scientists in India who have considered the question of what contemporary science means to contemporary society. Are scientists thinking along these lines? I would want someone to update Bernal, and tell us the background to the way science has developed, how it is being used societally, and what are the kinds of questions that perhaps even non-scientists can pose to some of the work that is being done by scientists. In other words, where and what is the scientific consciousness about the role of science in the wider perception of the Indian world? The criticism of science, yes, is necessary, but it demands a prior discussion of what we mean by scientific thinking and the significance of how we understand the world and human society through the science that we are doing. I think scientists have been left to pursue their interests more easily, because it's tough to understand science, much tougher, people think, than to understand the social sciences. And therefore there is much more criticism of the social sciences, which are seen as more accessible, than of the natural and physical sciences. The 'mystique' of a discipline is legitimate at one level but

the 'mystique' should not make it opaque.

There has been a growth of autonomy through differentiation, as was mentioned, not only in the natural sciences, but in the social sciences as well. I think that whereas one celebrates the shift in history in the 1960s and 70s, or at least my kind of pre-modern history—shifting from Indology into the social sciences—one is also aware that there is a far greater specialization now in each of the social sciences, which at another level has also isolated the different ways of looking at knowledge and at society in a holistic way and in explaining it to the uninitiated. And I think that this differentiation has in some ways, although not altogether, been problematic and somewhat difficult. It might not be a bad idea to get back to having a more holistic understanding, not only of science and society, but even of the relationship of the social sciences to the sciences. In this connection I would like to bring in another dimension that hasn't been touched upon this far in the book, namely, the difference between technology and science, because I think that much of the approach to science today, in India, is actually conditioned by wanting to treat it like technology. Yes, there is an element of technology in it, in the sense that technology can be seen as the reflection of certain kinds of science, but on the other hand it is different, its function is different. I have the feeling that, these days, there are many professionals who are essentially technicians, whether of the natural sciences or the social sciences, and that we forget that there are philosophies and knowledge systems behind any investigation and that these are more than just technology.

There was a time when we had many people of vision with whom one could argue about the direction in which the engine could take the car; today we have many more

technicians who can turn the screws and make the engine work but have little interest in where the car is going. These fundamentals of what might be called the process of education and of thinking through the problems we face are seldom recognized and their visibility is perhaps most apparent in those who govern us. We wait expectantly for indications of where we are being taken or at least to be asked where we want to go. The assumption is that a basically ill-educated public cannot imagine a different world and refrains from questions, or is not to be given the opportunity to question. Not understanding what science actually means accounts in part for the cheerful fantasies that are proclaimed without a moment's hesitation—that joining an elephant's head onto the body of a boy to create Ganesha was a demonstration of plastic surgery that was practiced thousands of years ago in India, or that the birth of the Kauravas from jars resulted from successful stem cell research. This is not only scientifically untenable but it also annuls the pleasure of an entertaining myth.

The interlink between knowledge and how society comprehends it is fundamental: knowledge keeps changing, and society has to understand the implications of the change. This is so apparent in the science and technology of communication systems of current times. This is another area where the public intellectual becomes crucial, whether as a scientist or a social scientist or in whatever field.

In defining the public intellectual, Peter deSouza interestingly made a distinction between the autonomous thinker and the advocate of social justice. Some distinction is of course necessary, but should it be a clearly marked one? I think there is a commonality in the context from which both the autonomous thinker and the advocate of social justice

are coming, and the context is often similar although not identical. And in a sense both are raising questions relevant to the context, and the context here *is* extremely important and deserves greater attention. Does the one pose a challenge to the other—the context and the thinker? If so, what is the challenge, and how can the challenge be met? Then also, once we've moved beyond asking questions and arriving at the point of suggesting solutions, how does one choose a solution? You resolve the question, yes, but you resolve it by choosing a particular answer or a particular solution, and that again has to be examined in terms of the reasons for choosing a particular solution. The choice of a solution is in a sense the tipping point. How do public intellectuals select the 'value' that they assess, for example, in the concept of patriotism? Should it be in a context and is it an absolute value?

The context becomes relevant when we know that there are some categories of citizens who experience a fear that does not prevail among others. Minorities, Dalits, Adivasis and women, although in theory equal citizens, with the same status as members of the majority community, do however suffer from a lesser status in lived experience. Theoretically, the fear should be annulled through the protection of the state, but such protection cannot be assumed except for the wealthy and the well connected. So can we argue that because we as citizens make the state we can also change the way it functions when actually we seem to be powerless to do so? There have been exceptional events like the election that ended the Emergency. One hopes that elections will remain a free expression. The agencies that officially secure the rights of citizens have to safeguard their own autonomy in order to protect citizens. Do they do so? Is it even understood that they are required to do

so as a primary duty when they undergo training as officers of the law and administration? Or are they merely trained to continue the colonial system of obeying those in authority irrespective of the protection of citizens?

What is more dangerous for the citizen is of course not only the injustice in which politicians and the state may be involved, but rather the fear generated by threats from a range of fundamentalist groups, often reorganized as gangs, whose violence terrorizes citizens. The cause of fear is in many ways crucial and I am glad that this was discussed. The inequality of the questioner and the one acting negatively against the good of the society—the example that is always quoted being the 'extremist' who creates terror—draws on fear. There is, quite rightly, in a situation of fear, a fuzzy sense of authority as it is not very clear as to exactly which authority we are either opposing or appealing to, and on what grounds. Occasionally it is clear and the clarity gives direction. But in the absence of clarity there is a sense of the one shading into the other, and that creates problems. This exists, I think (and I may sound obstinate about this), this exists because we don't speak up enough, because we don't question enough. If we were to question much more, and discuss much more, and debate much more, then the identification of what we are frightened of would probably become a little clearer. It might even become less fearful.

Smaller groups and organizations that are part of the majority community and that indulge in terrorism are feared because they carry the tacit support of the majority. It is the responsibility of the majority to disown these activities of groups that are part of their fold. Why don't Hindus come out in large numbers and condemn the desecration of

churches? Does the larger community of Hindus condone the vandalizing of institutions, the pulping of books and so on? But the strength of Hindu extremist groups where they use terror tactics lies in the fact that they claim to be speaking for the larger community, and the larger community is not standing up to them and negating this claim. They are feared by others, not just because they are a small violence-driven group, but also because they are carrying the legitimacy of the larger group. This is characteristic not only of such groups among Hindus but among Muslims as well. These latter can use the added threat of similar groups from elsewhere. The same happens with extremists of other kinds who function as terrorist groups if they choose to. Terrorists can be weakened if the communities that they claim to be defending and representing start disowning them.

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To address the matter of the impact of the Enlightenment that Neeladri Bhattacharya has singled out—it is true that the Enlightenment produced its own orthodoxies, it produced its own authoritativeness, its own restrictiveness. But when one is turning to the past and looking at a school of knowledge or thought, one is not just looking at the Enlightenment with unhesitating praise and wanting to follow that line of thinking. One is conceding that there were some negative features at some point, and it would be worth trying to understand why this happened. Similarly one could say that the Buddha starts off with a well-reasoned message based on logic and causal analysis, and the denial of divinity, yet the forms that his teaching takes in later centuries incorporates gods and goddesses and mystical beings. I often wonder: if the Buddha were alive today, what

would he recognize as being closest to his teaching in the different manifestations of Buddhism? I think it is important, therefore, when one is talking about knowledge and teachings of the past, to consider the question of why these change over time, and at what point, and sometimes into something quite other than what the original thinkers had started with. I think that is also relevant to the question of asking questions.

Like all new thought linked to historical disjuncture, the Enlightenment has also to be seen both in terms of how it changed its own present and what it subsequently became. One's concern is perhaps less with observing what was critiqued as with how new systems were built on the critique. All critiques have a social context and today we are more sensitive to the limitations of assessing this. Enlightenment or movements that are similar to it are the start of a process of questioning. We have to consider how the questioning should proceed.

Turning to the subject of defining the kinds of people who in the past asked questions, I agree that a typology was and is necessary and apposite. Let me clarify that by referring to all these persons from the past, from pre-modern times, I was not in fact bunching them all together. Again, I didn't make the differentiation sharply enough, but they represent different facets of questioning. The Buddha's questioning is different from the questioning of someone like Amir Khusrau; obviously, they are from different historical times, they're different figures, the context is different and the purpose of their questioning differs. But the point that I was trying to make was that given these diverse contexts and, perhaps irrespective of the differences, there were still people asking questions. And it's that asking of questions and the nature of the questions implicit in their thinking that I was trying to give more emphasis to, rather

than the context.

Speaking up has to make sense to contemporaries: you can't speak up only by quoting Socrates and the Buddha. However nostalgic I may be about ancient times, I wouldn't suggest that. But I think what is central is precisely that thinkers and questioners like Socrates and the Buddha were addressing themselves to their contemporaries. The kind of views that they held would be considered irrelevant perhaps to the problems of today: they're passé, not everybody would be interested in their views. But nevertheless, they were addressing their contemporaries, and I was trying to make the analogy that we have to do the same thing: we have to also spend some time in addressing our contemporaries but in a relevant way. And in doing so we may find that some of the questions are not that irrelevant.

Yes, the impact of the intellectual contribution is not as great as it might seem, and I would agree that we made a mistake in the 60s and 70s in assuming that just because we had the trappings, the surface, the veneer of a secular society, that we had succeeded in becoming secular. But let me just try and put in a little word in our defence: there were some of us even in the 60s, who were saying, 'We're not really secular, there are communal forces in our society which we have to be aware of.' And we were writing pamphlets, and bringing attention to this feature, and were being dismissed as alarmists. Unfortunately, we didn't sound the alarm as loudly as we should have done. We allowed ourselves to be called alarmists. That is why I have been arguing that public intellectuals have to be more assertive. But then the degree to which the equivalent of civilized public intellectuals should be assertive in order to be effective, is a matter that has been debated for centuries.

Let me also say that I am sorry if I presented a dismal picture of the present. I didn't intend that, and if that is so, I must hastily correct it. Yes, I am nostalgic about the past, there's no doubt about it, and here I am referring not to millennia ago but to the recent past of half a century ago. I think when one gets to be the age that I am, one has the right to be nostalgic about the past if one so chooses. This is something that is a given, and I treat it now as my birthright! Nevertheless, I agree that one must hesitate to assume that everything was positive in those days—obviously not, because if everything had been brilliant then, we might not have ended up where we are today.

What I was trying to say was that there are ways in which we could be doing all this much better. There are ways in which we could be thinking about improving our present to a much greater extent, there are ways in which we should be *talking* about the present, and creating a greater awareness about the problems that we now confront, which is so essential.

◆

Historians sometimes like to see historical moments as those of conjuncture when there seems to be a coming together of thought and action in a coherent way, and other times as disjuncture when things seem to be coming apart, resulting in confusion. What we are witnessing today, for example, is a major historical change, at many levels, in many different ways. It is the kind of change that we have probably never experienced in the past since it was initiated through the colonial attempt to deliberately change our society and it is now taking on yet another transformation. And it is precisely the kind of moment when you expect people to do a commentary on

what's going on, to disentangle it and say that this is what we have had, and possibly these are the ways in which we are changing, and what are the implications of the change. I would emphasize that the question of the role of the public intellectual is not only to help us analyse the conjuncture and the disjuncture, but also to consider the implications of what's going on. And that is I think an extremely important aspect, which we don't experience enough of: we see much more of a criticism of the imminent, and much less of people saying, 'Well, if this happens, and that happens, these are likely to be the results'. That is really desperately needed at this moment, if for no other reason than to make all of us understand more clearly where we are at.

The question of differentiation and specialization was raised, and I think that is important. What was said about the fact that knowledge, and the way we treat it, the way we analyse it, the way we take it forward, is very different now from what it was forty years ago, is quite obviously correct. Changes in acquiring and understanding knowledge will continue to happen. Differentiation means specialization in all these fields—the sciences, the social sciences, it is beginning to mark the humanities as well—and specialization sometimes makes the public withdraw. There is a very basic question here, and a contradiction: the more specialized the knowledge, the more advanced and the deeper it gets, the more one person knows about a particular narrow field, the more other people will know far less, so when other people make comments on that field the specialist points out their ignorance. And this is what is beginning to happen now with academia and the public. For example, in my field, a number of people, from the topmost dignitaries to literally the man in the street, time and again,

make all kinds of claims about what happened in ancient times. We as specialists are saying, no, it was not like that, and try and explain why it could not have been so. This condition is in some ways a contradiction. It is predictable that as you get more and more specialized, the distance from the non-specialist grows. But this is precisely the kind of area in which one expects people to say, 'Well, we will try and explain what the specialist is doing in a manner which is comprehensible to the wider public if the specialist cannot do so.' But that kind of reliable intermediary between research and its popular understanding is lacking in our society and is desperately needed. It has been argued that this degree of specialization in many parts of the world has become so intense that in those societies the public intellectual now has a marginal role. Either there is a specialist who knows exactly everything about the little ant and what it does, or there are those who don't know anything and just carry on doing what they've been told to do. This may be an exaggeration, but I think that then the context in each case has to be the condition of the society that one is talking about. The latter kind of society is not one that I would want to live in and I am sure that goes for many others.

Nostalgia seems to be taking more space than I had intended it to. I would not say categorically that the past in the latter part of the twentieth century was necessarily a better time but I carry the impression that it was a time when there were many more independent opinions and there was an insistence on debating them and there were spaces to do so. I agree that merely returning to old ideas is of little help when the circumstances have changed. Discussion of the contemporary context would be a prelude to critiquing negative activities and words. There are categories among public

intellectuals and they speak in varying ways. We have to be sensitive to differences and to those who speak softly. But at the same time soft-speaking is difficult to hear when those being questioned are maintaining a cacophony of sound that they claim are arguments. Ideology has a role, not in terms of the hard lines of political parties, but in providing a backdrop to why questions are being asked and from what perspective and to what end. Questioning the other does require imagining the other but such an imagining at some point has to touch reality. What is that point and how does it come about?

Ideology frequently determines the stand one takes on various issues and how one explains them. What the ideology is becomes apparent in the space that is given to debate an argument. I don't buy the idea that the left liberal in India is now drowned and that it is the turn of the right liberal to take over with the change introduced in 1991 and with the present central government. Fortunately, the most purposive ideology need not be tied to a particular political party. One is grateful for that in present times! What matters is a sufficiency of space for an argument to be debated and a sufficiency of people involved in the debate. Can one say that, 'You can take a non-secular position, and maintain that society will be destroyed by secularism, which I disagree with, but you have to argue in defence of your proposition as I have to argue in defence of opposing it.' But there must be that space for argument. It is not enough just to say that ideology is important, and that one ideology is giving way to another. One ideology is not giving way to the other, ideologies don't chase each other in this fashion. But one does require opportunities to debate ideas and their application. And if we can do it, as Sundar Sarukkai has said, in the fashion of the pratipaksha and the

purvapaksha, and have a code by which abuse is replaced by critical argument, this would be great. This will come about if the argument of the other and its context is understood, and the asking of a question or making a comment enhances the understanding.

Finally, we come to the intervention of the public intellectual. There has to be a distinction between the concerned public intellectual and those performing a role. The performance is by those not actually qualified but who play the role because it may be politically expedient to do so. The former is generally a person who is consistent in taking a position on issues of a just society, and in doing so with an understanding of the issues and their implications for society—an understanding based on both information and analysis. Ideology would be a consideration but related to how the argument is being made and what is the degree of intervention in favour of the public good. Whether or not it conforms to the views of a political party is open to the individual's choice and the individual's understanding of what is to be conveyed to the public, and why it is relevant and necessary to do so. The ultimate aim is to engage the public in thinking about the present and the kind of society in which people want to live, and ultimately and inevitably, what this will mean for those who will of course come after us as citizens.

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SCIENCE AND DEMOCRACY

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